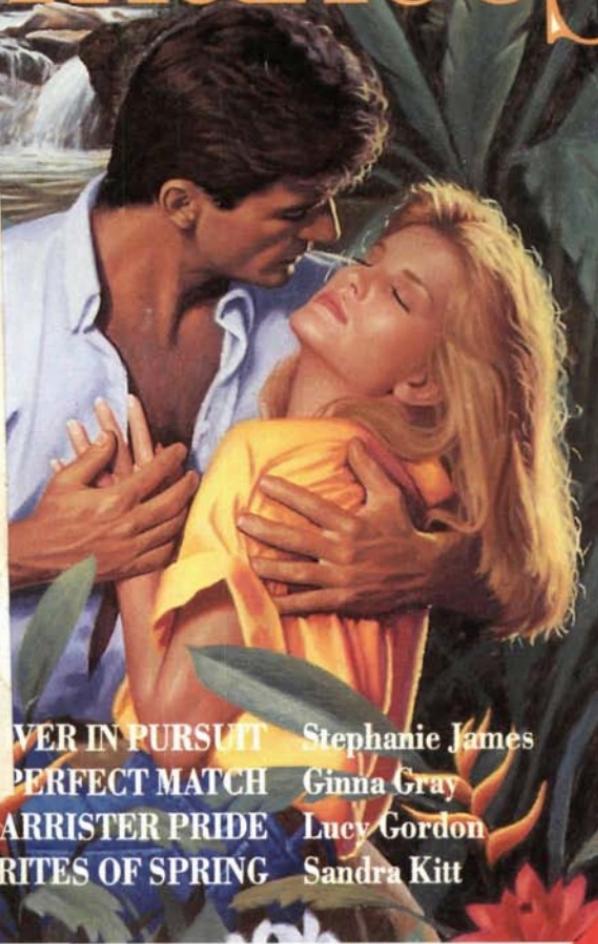


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Vol. 2 No. 5

WORLD'S BEST
Romances



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LINDA RODGERS
LINDA BUXTON
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VER IN PURSUIT
PERFECT MATCH
THE CARRISTER PRIDE
RITES OF SPRING

Stephanie James
Ginna Gray
Lucy Gordon
Sandra Kitt

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STEPHANIE JAMES

Stephanie James is considered one of romance fiction's most popular writers. The author, whose commitment to the genre continues to grow with her success and reputation, has more than ten million copies of her books in print. She presently lives in Washington State with her husband.

GINNA GRAY

A native Houstonian, Ginna Gray admits that since childhood, she has been a compulsive reader as well as a head-in-the-clouds dreamer. Long accustomed to expressing her creativity in tangible ways, she finally decided to put her fantasies and wild imaginings down on paper. The result? The mother of two now spends eight hours a day as a full-time writer.



LUCY GORDON

Lucy Gordon met her husband-to-be in Venice, fell in love the first evening and got engaged two days later. After seventeen years, they're still happily married and now live in England with their three dogs. As well as being the recipient of numerous awards for her romance fiction, Lucy was a writer for an English women's magazine for twelve years.



SANDRA KITT

Sandra Kitt is a librarian for a major museum in New York City, where she and her husband currently reside. Aside from her writing, Sandra is also a free-lance graphic designer and has had several pieces used as greeting cards for UNICEF.



Romances

From the desk of Candy Lee,
Managing Editor

Dear Romance Reader:

Welcome to the spring issue of WORLD'S BEST ROMANCES, and to four romantic stories by bestselling authors Stephanie James, Ginna Gray, Lucy Gordon and Sandra Kitt.

To paraphrase a famous quotation, "In spring a woman's fancy turns to love."

In its own unique way, each story in this issue captures the joy of being alive and in love, that feeling that is shared by women all over the world--it doesn't matter how old you are, where you live, your occupation...

We hope you enjoy these stories, and that they inspire you to lively and delightful springtime frolics!

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Candy Lee".

112 Tenth Street, P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233

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WORLD'S BEST

Romances

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**STEPHANIE
JAMES**
**Lover in
Pursuit**



The light in his amber eyes lit embers that hadn't died. But Reyna MacKenzie vowed she'd never again succumb to Trevor Langdon's promise of love.

At first glance Reyna thought it was only a trick of her senses—an illusion created by the soft, velvety light of dusk as it descended on the Hawaiian island of Maui.

But there could be absolutely no doubt about the identity of the man pacing purposefully in her direction. It had been six months since he'd coolly made it clear he no longer had any use for her, but Reyna knew a lifetime could have passed and her senses would still have responded with complete recognition.

She'd know that face for all time. Those deep amber eyes gleamed with intelligence and cool appraisal. Even if she hadn't recognized the man, Reyna thought with the beginnings of a rueful humor, she would have recognized the clothes, or at least the deceptively casual style with which he wore them!

Trev Langdon was the only man of her acquaintance who, several hours after having landed in Hawaii, would still be wearing a crisp white shirt and tie together with an expensive jacket and slacks. The thought of the sand, which must be pouring into those expensive Italian leather shoes, made Reyna's mouth quirk in silent laughter.

"Hello, Reyna." He halted a pace or two from the water's edge.

"Hello, Trev. You are, quite literally, the last man on earth I ever expected to see here." Her voice, Reyna was pleased to note, was light, carefree, pleasantly amused. Everything was under control. "What are you doing so far from Seattle?"

"I came to find you."

The simple, straightforward words still sent a tiny jolt through Reyna's nervous system. "I see," she managed. "How did you find me?"

"It took a little doing," he admitted quietly.

It hadn't been simple, Reyna knew. Trev must have asked quite a few people before he found someone who actually knew she'd moved to the Hawaiian Islands and he'd have had to dig even deeper to find an exact address. But, then, Trev Langdon could be quite resourceful. Who knew that better than she?

"My compliments on your detective work," she mocked lightly.

The amber gaze slitted for an instant as he absorbed her amusement. "It's a little difficult conducting a conversation while you're splashing about in the surf," he told her mildly. "Would you mind if we went back to your place?"

"Sorry. At the moment I feel like walking in the water. But you wouldn't dream of crushing the fabric of a two-hundred-dollar pair of slacks by rolling them up to your knees, would you?" she taunted lightly.

"There was a time when you wouldn't have had a pair of faded jeans like that in your closet," he shot back coolly.

"I know," Reyna agreed. "I've changed."

"Have you, Reyna? Or are you just in hiding?"

"Did you think I'd spend six months licking my wounds, Trev?" she asked deliberately.

He drew in his breath and said carefully, "You went through a great deal six months ago. I didn't realize just how much until after it was all over."

"Thank you for your sympathy and understanding, but I assure you they're entirely unnecessary—"

"I didn't know, for example, that the whole mess was going to cost you your

job," he interrupted grimly. "But you knew it, didn't you? You never explained, Reyna. You never told me how much was riding on that business maneuver."

"Would it have made any difference?" she whispered.

There was a long hesitation. "No. I did what I had to do, Reyna," he said flatly.

"I know. I wasn't exactly fired," she told him dryly.

"I realize that. You could have stayed on with your company, but the chance of another promotion was gone the moment you told me you would kill the negotiations for my brother-in-law's company."

"There aren't any excuses for a failure of that magnitude," Reyna agreed, stifling the memories.

"And, knowing the inevitable outcome, you politely handed in your resignation," Trev concluded shortly. "Then you fled to Hawaii."

Reyna slanted him a look of protest. "I came for a vacation and decided to stay here on Maui. Are you here because, six months after the fact, you've become guilt-stricken?"

"It's not that! Damn it, I did what I had to do, Reyna. When my sister begged me to come to the aid of her husband, there wasn't much I could do. You were going to gobble up his computer firm for your company as if it were a light snack."

"But you found my vulnerable point and moved in with a brilliance I've admired ever since."

"You must hate my guts. But I can deal with that."

The small shiver which coursed down her spine was gone almost before she noticed it. Six months in the Hawaiian Islands was a sure cure for even the most passionate heartbreak. Reyna came to a sudden halt in the surf.

"Okay, Trev," she said quietly, "let's have it. Why have you come?"

He set his mouth in a firm line. "I've come to take you home with me, Reyna. I want you back."

When he looked at her like that, his whole body radiating his intent, he still had the power to shake her.

"I didn't fully realize at the time just how deeply you felt about me. I knew you were attracted to me and I knew I could use that attraction to manipulate you."

"You had to use whatever tools came to hand."

The gold eyes narrowed. Trev Langdon knew about passion and desire and attraction. He did not know a whole lot about love. And until she'd met him, Reyna admitted silently, neither had she.

"Reyna, will you get the hell out of the water and let me take you someplace where we can talk?" He raked a hand through his dark hair.

"I'm meeting someone for dinner. Talk fast, Trev, and maybe you'll be able to get everything said on the way back to my apartment." She set off across the sand, heading toward one of the condominium complexes overlooking the ocean.

He fell into step beside her. Reyna could feel the disapproval in him. "A man?"

She sighed. "Poor Trev. What on earth made you think you could walk back into my life after six months and expect to find me waiting patiently?"

"I expected to find a woman who couldn't even bear to stay in the same city with me after what happened."

"My goodness! How dramatic! You don't have to start feeling guilty at this stage!"

"I'm not feeling guilty, damn it! But I do want you back." He halted, reaching out abruptly to catch hold of her wrist and pull her to a stop. "I want what you had to give six months ago, Reyna Mackenzie. This time there won't be any business maneuvers going on in the

background. This time what happens will be just between you and me."

She stood very still, her eyes meeting his. "It's all over, Trev. I knew it was probably going to be all over the morning I told you I'd let your brother-in-law's firm escape my net. Don't you remember?"

"I remember," he whispered heavily. "I remember you surrendering in my arms that last night. I remember how you looked the next morning when you told me you were going to give me what I wanted. I decided I must be reading you all wrong."

"And later, after I'd assured you your brother-in-law's firm was safe, you calmly told me that was all you'd wanted from me," Reyna concluded.

"At that point I didn't understand exactly what had happened. Reyna, you fell in love with me!"

"I know." She smiled up at him serenely. "But I fully understood that you had an ulterior motive in seducing me."

His fingers on her wrist tightened. He used the grip to draw her closer. Once again a faint chill touched Reyna. She was close to him now, too close. She could feel the heat and vitality of his body. It provoked old memories and brought back suppressed images.

He caught his breath and she sensed the urgency in him as his free hand reached out to touch the side of her cheek. "Reyna, sweetheart, can't you see? I didn't realize what you were offering me. I've never had a woman love me, really *love* me before. I didn't recognize what I had...."

"And now you do?"

"Yes, now I do!"

The hand on her cheek moved with a sensitive roughness, curling around the nape of her neck and holding her still as he slowly lowered his mouth to hers. There was a kind of deliberate, persuasive passion in his kiss, as if he expected to find resistance and was determined to overcome it right from the start.

But any reaction she might feel this time around would be purely physical in nature, Reyna reminded herself. She no longer loved Trev Langdon. Knowing that fact with great certainty, she did not fight the marauding kiss as he strove to excite her. Her body shuddered a little beneath the sensual impact, but she told herself that was only natural. It meant nothing.

Trev felt the response and sighed deeply as his mouth shifted to trace the line of her jaw. Reyna's eyes squeezed tightly shut as he found the sensitive skin of her throat. No, she thought grimly, I don't love him, but her fingertips curved unconsciously, seeking the shape of the smoothly muscled chest beneath the hand-tailored clothing he wore.

"You see, Reyna?" he breathed as he felt the telltale movement. He lifted his head and she opened her eyes to find flickering satisfaction in his gaze. "Deep down you still love me, sweetheart, and I swear I'll make up for what you've been through...!"

"What I've been through?" Reyna echoed, recovering quickly from the chaos. "But, Trev, I don't want to recover from what you did to me!" Gray-green eyes gleamed as she lifted her hands to shape his face. "Without my encounter with you I'd still be single-mindedly en route to the top of the corporate world."

"Don't you think I know that? Reyna, I'll make it up to you!" he vowed fiercely.

"Listen to me, Trev!" He still didn't understand. "I enjoy my new life! I wouldn't want to go back to that sixteen-hour-a-day grind even if I could. I've discovered a whole new way of living and I love it!"

"Reyna, you don't have to pretend...."

She laughed, using her fingertips to smooth the lines of his answering frown.

"I'm not pretending. I'm happy, Trev. Happier than I've ever been in my entire

thirty years. So go back to Seattle before the sand ruins the polish on those lovely shoes. I'm sorry if you've been suffering from an uneasy conscience these past few months. There was no call for remorse."

She stood on tiptoe and brushed her mouth lightly against his. Then she stepped back. "This is my world, Trev." Reyna smiled, sweeping one hand out to indicate the balmy, tropical atmosphere. "You have my deepest thanks for being the catalyst, which helped me discover it. Good night, Trev. Enjoy your stay on Maui."

With a casual wave, Reyna turned and walked away from the man for whom she had once given up everything. The man she had once loved.

*

IT WASN'T UNTIL she'd reached the safety of her garden apartment that Reyna realized she'd been holding her breath. She shook her head, a little dazed.

Everything in the light, airy room reflected the changes she had made in her life in the past six months. The wicker and rattan furniture was upholstered in cool, bright cotton. The floor was covered by a mat of woven pond fronds, which was cheerfully impervious to damp feet. Overhead a lazy fan moved the air about on humid evenings. Large tropical plants and an expanse of windows with a sea view brought the outdoors inside. It was a far cry from the elegant town-house apartment she'd maintained in Seattle. Her home was as different as her current choice in men!

President of Langdon & Associates, Trev was one of the powerful new breed of financial experts who specialized in securing venture capital for aggressive firms. He could take one look at a firm's management and financial situation and know exactly where its strengths and weaknesses were. He'd done that with his brother-in-law's computer company and realized at once that there was no re-

alistic business method of fending off Reyna's takeover advance.

So he'd approached Reyna directly. The attraction between them had been instant and electric, and he'd used it. He'd been cool and remote when she'd told him his relative was safe from her. In fact, if she hadn't known him better, Reyna would almost have said there was a kind of wariness that day in Trey Langdon. As soon as he had cut the bonds between them he had *waited*. To this day she didn't know what he had been expecting.

The logical, rational side of her had been anticipating his rejection, however, and having been somewhat prepared for it she had been able to handle the situation with an outward calm that amazed her. With a small, understanding smile, she'd gotten to her feet, said a polite good-bye and left. By the end of the week she'd handed in her resignation and prepared for the trip to Hawaii. Since then she'd returned to the mainland only once, and then just long enough to break the lease on her Seattle town house.

She'd made the right decision, she told herself now as she removed the clip in her sunstreaked hair and brushed it out so that it fell loosely around her shoulders. The flower-splashed sheath she selected floated easily over her figure, its low, rounded neckline cool and casual. She was ready for the date with Kent Eaton.

And none too soon, she thought, turning from the mirror as the doorbell chimed.

"Hi, I'm all set." She smiled up at the blond, darkly tanned man waiting on the other side of the door.

At thirty-three Kent had put his love of the sea to practical use by opening a popular snorkel, surfboard and catamaran rental shop on the beach. His tanned, well-molded body reflected the hours he spent in the sun.

"How was business today?" Reyna asked as they walked to the main lobby of the condominium-hotel.

"Too good. I only got to spend an hour in the water."

"The price of success," Reyna teased. She automatically glanced at the front-desk clerk she knew would be on duty.

"Everything okay, Jim?" she asked.

"Sure." The middle-aged man behind the desk grinned. "That guy in the suit find you earlier?"

"He found me," she affirmed.

"You don't look too thrilled." Jim chuckled.

"Well, he's not exactly my type," she retorted.

"Too bad. He's checked in for a ten-day stay."

"Checked in! Here?" Reyna's smile vanished.

"I'm crushed," Trev Langdon drawled from the open entrance behind them.

Reyna whirled. "Don't be offended, Trev," she said as he approached the front desk. "Sometimes we seem a bit cavalier toward tourists, but deep down we appreciate each and every one of you."

"*We?*" he stressed inquiringly, but the amber gaze was roving over Kent Eaton.

"Oh, definitely *we*," she murmured with a smiling glance at Jim. "I have the day shift behind the front desk."

"Incredible," Trev growled. When Jim and Kent both stared at him, he added, "There was a time not too long ago when she could have been buying or selling this place."

"How the mighty are fallen, hmm? Now, if you'll excuse us?"

"Who the hell is that?" Kent grumbled as they slipped into his small open Jeep.

"That," she murmured, "was Wellington. Did you ever hear of the battle of Waterloo?"

He glanced at her, forehead creasing in a small frown. "Who played Napoleon?"

"I did," she said simply. "Let's talk about something else, okay?"

He hesitated and then shrugged. "Okay. How's the plan for the gourmet shop going?"

Reyna's gray-green eyes lit up. "I meant to tell you. I've discovered the perfect location. Now I'll have to start negotiations with the bank and with the owner."

There was a long pause from Kent's side of the Jeep. "Reyna? Could you really have bought and sold the condo-hotel you're working in now?"

"I was in charge of... acquiring various enterprises for a large conglomerate."

"Did you like doing that sort of thing?"

"At the time I thought I did," she replied honestly. "I've since changed my mind."

"And Wellington back there?"

"He's part of that past life." Reyna felt a flash of satisfaction as she said the words.

Hank's restaurant in the historic old whaling town of Lahaina was humming with its usual cheerful, friendly crowd. The mahimahi was, indeed, fresh and the mai-tai drinks were precisely what Reyna needed to take her mind off the farewell scene at the hotel.

At the end of the evening Reyna bid her friend a casual good-night and crawled into her oversize bamboo bed with his kiss resting lightly on her lips.

But it wasn't that affectionate embrace that shaped her dreams. It was the image of a pair of amber eyes.

THE NEXT morning Reyna plunged into her duties with alacrity. She had finished giving an elderly couple from Nebraska driving directions to Haleakala, the island's huge, dormant volcano when, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Trev approach. Everyone else in the lobby had on sandals or thongs. Trev was wearing a pair of supple calfskin casuals which had probably cost a couple of hundred dollars.

"Hello, Reyna," he murmured. "I wanted to see you in action behind the front desk. How long have you been, uh, clerking?"

"Since shortly after I arrived," she told him lightly, refusing to rise to the not-so-subtle goad. "Good jobs like this one are hard to get here."

He smiled slowly, a thoroughly charming expression laced with a dash of wickedness. "I know where you can get a better one. Have dinner with me tonight and I'll tell you about it," he continued invitingly.

"No thanks."

"Are you afraid I won't leave you on your doorstep with a polite little good-night kiss?"

Reyna froze and then her head snapped up. "You may think I've sunk a bit low taking on this job, but offhand, I'd say you've fallen a lot farther if you're resorting to spying on ex-girlfriends!"

"Lover," he countered. "Not girlfriend. And I don't think there's anything 'ex' about it," he growled, the amber gaze going darkly golden.

"Cause any scenes while you're here, Trev, and I won't hesitate to call in reinforcements." She leaned forward. "We have ways of dealing with you mainlanders!"

Something burned for an instant in the golden gaze, something that might have been quite dangerous, but it disappeared almost at once.

"Reyna, I've come a long way to find you."

"If you're asking me to reimburse you for travel expenses, you're out of luck. This job doesn't pay nearly as well as my last one did!"

"Reyna, please." There was a curiously harsh wistfulness in the words. "If I get down on my knees, will you agree to have dinner with me?"

It was a novelty having Trev Langdon pleading for a dinner date. My God! she thought ruefully, I gave him a lot less ar-

gument than this the night I went to his bed!

Before she quite realized what she was doing, the words were out of her mouth. "All right, Trev."

REYNA'S HAIR was down around her shoulders, trimmed with a brilliant red blossom. She felt like an island girl going out on a date.

Trev reached out unexpectedly to touch the soft mass. "You never used to wear your hair that way."

"It didn't fit my old life-style," she pointed out, stepping delicately out of reach of the questing fingers.

He moved, taking her arm in a firm grip as she shut the door behind her. "Worried about falling victim to my brilliant seduction techniques?"

"No." She smiled as he started her down the path. "I'm quite cured."

"You keep saying that. But I don't believe you. I never should have let you walk out of my office that day."

"What were you expecting me to say that day, Trev?" Reyna asked suddenly as he slipped her into the front seat of the car he had rented. "I had the strangest feeling you were...waiting for something."

His mouth hardened as they drove away. "A scene, I suppose. I'd won our little encounter and I thought your temper would explode when you realized you'd lost."

"I see," she whispered. "And what were you going to do after I'd tried to scratch your eyes out?"

"Offer an affair," he said easily. "But I never got the chance."

"I've always been curious about one thing. Whatever became of your brother-in-law's firm? I've always wondered if someone else came along after me and took it over anyway."

"Someone else would have if I hadn't spent the better part of the last six months putting John back on his feet financially," Trev allowed grittily.

"Well, that satisfies the last bits of curiosity I have about my old life."

The restaurant was a perfect setting for a sparkling evening. They went through the menu, discussing it with the enthusiasm which had characterized their eating adventures six months ago. By the time they had settled on the coconut and macadamia-nut soufflé for dessert, Reyna found herself having to fight off a tendency to reminisce.

Trev, on the other hand, was not above using any weakness he sensed.

"Do you remember that great Japanese restaurant down by the waterfront in Seattle? They've put in a sushi bar. You'd love it."

"Really?" She kept her voice non-committal. "There's a lot of fantastic Oriental cooking here in—"

"Reyna! Good to see you." The restaurant manager had strolled over to the table. "What's this I hear about your leasing one of the shops here in the mall?"

Aware of Trev's immediate interest, Reyna shrugged lightly. "I'm going to go ahead with plans for that gourmet-foods shop I mentioned to you a few weeks ago. I'll start checking out financing tomorrow, as a matter of fact."

Eddy nodded. "I can see you making a fortune on gourmet picnic lunches. The L.A. and San Francisco crowd will really go for them!"

"What shop?" Trev demanded immediately once they were alone again.

Stifling a certain wariness, Reyna told him of her plans and when she'd finished she found herself waiting with a strange expectancy. Reyna knew she would find herself paying attention to his financial opinions.

But instead of commenting on the business aspects of the project, Trev said gruffly, "Going into business here isn't quite the same as working the front desk of that condo, Reyna. You'll be committing yourself."

She shook her head in exasperation. "I already *am* committed to my new life."

She winced as she saw the glint of challenge in his eyes. "Then I'll just have to work very hard at changing your mind, won't I?"

"I never thought you were the type to waste time on a useless project," she murmured sadly.

"Look," he interrupted with sudden tension, "I want a second chance. I'm betting everything on the belief that deep down you couldn't have fallen out of love with me in six months. I've spent more nights than I want to remember trying to tell myself that all I needed was another woman, but it didn't work," he plowed on. "I want to be loved. I've had a taste of the real thing and now I'm addicted. I know I've got a job ahead of me convincing you to come back to me but I'm going to do it!"

Her breath felt shallow and a little tight and there was a tingling awareness throughout her body. *He* was dangerous.

"Keep talking along those lines and you're going to find yourself with a lot of spare time on your hands this evening," she forced herself to joke.

He ignored her attempt to divert him. He reached across the table and lightly touched Reyna's wrist in a small, intimate gesture. "Sweetheart, I'll give you anything you want...."

She had to break the spell.

"Would you," she murmured with a reckless grin, "take off that tie for me? It's driving me crazy. You're the only one in the whole restaurant wearing one!"

He blinked and sat back. Then he smiled in open challenge.

"You're welcome to remove it," he drawled.

He meant after dinner, she knew. It was a blatantly sexual invitation to undress him and Reyna realized she couldn't let him get away with it.

Eyes shimmering very green in the soft light, she reached across the table with-

out any warning and tugged at the precise knot of the striped tie. Reyna knew a flash of victory at having taken him by surprise.

"There," she exclaimed cheerfully, pulling the tie from around his neck. "That's much better."

Reyna found herself chatting more freely. Her wineglass was never empty but his attentive refilling of it didn't bother her. Reyna was almost sorry to see the evening end when he parked the car in the condominium parking lot.

An impish thought struck. "How about a swim? Have you ever gone swimming in the ocean at night, Trev? It's marvelously exhilarating."

"You're sure you wouldn't rather have a nice, quiet drink?"

"Come on, Trev." She opened the car door. "I'll change and meet you at the gazebo in the garden." Reyna hurried off to her apartment before he could change his mind.

There was no doubt in her mind that he would have felt much more at home with a glass of cognac in the intimate setting. But he was waiting obediently at the gazebo with a pair of snug, racing-style swim trunks hugging his lean hips.

The taut, strong thighs, flat stomach and sweep of broad shoulders all called to her senses tonight.

Firmly Reyna took a grip on herself. She stepped briskly forward.

He came forward and she moved quickly ahead of him, pretending not to see his outstretched hand. She felt the frustration in him as he silently followed her to the water.

Almost at once the sensual pleasure of the gentle, warm sea reached out to captivate her senses. In the moonlight, she could see the slight, sensual narrowing of Trev's eyes as he drank his fill of her.

"You appear to have been seduced by the islands, sweetheart," he finally murmured, "but I can offer something far more seductive."

The low, dragon's purr of his words carried the lacing of raw hunger she had sensed in him yesterday. Reyna turned away, determined to ignore his quiet, urgent approach. She had only taken three strokes when his arm closed around her. She gasped as he hauled her upright in the water and crushed her wet, slippery body close to his own.

She heard the low, fierce groan against her mouth as his lips took hers.

"Trev, no!"

His hands slid wetly down to her hips and he forced her intimately against his thighs as he took her lips and silenced the exclamation.

"I want you so, Reyna," he rasped, raising his head to bury his mouth against the sensitive skin behind her ear. "Now that I have you back in my arms I can't let you go."

Reyna's lashes flickered and then shut tightly against the urgent persuasion. She could feel the beginnings of a tightly coiled tension in her lower body, a tension she hadn't known since she had lain in Trev Langdon's arms. The beginnings of her own desire both frightened and excited her.

Would it be so very wrong if, after six months of dormancy, she once again allowed this man to release the wild spiral of physical sensation?

Her fingertips sank into the smoothly muscled shoulders and she experienced a curious sense of power as he trembled against her. His lips burned on her skin and she thrilled to the feel of him.

The seduction was all the more intense because of Trev's obvious, pleading hunger. Reyna flinched as his thumb grazed a little roughly across her nipple. The shiver ricocheted throughout her body, leaving her weak and clinging.

"Trev!" Her cry was soft, full of her need. In another instant she was clinging violently and he was reveling in the implied surrender.

"I knew," he whispered raggedly, his mouth dropping strings of hot, damp kisses from one breast to the other.

He murmured hoarsely against her throat, his hands tightening on her. Then Reyna's senses swirled abruptly as he lifted her high into his arms and strode out of the sea. She nestled against him, unprotesting, as he carried her away from the beach and back to the garden-shrouded condominium hotel.

She wanted him, Reyna acknowledged. She wanted him more than any other man she had ever known. Why should she deny herself the physical thrill of his lovemaking? He couldn't hurt her this time....

He carried her inside her apartment, kicking the door shut with one sandy, bare foot. With unerring instinct, he made for the bedroom. He set her in the center of the huge bed and followed her down onto the cool sheets, reaching for her with that passionate hunger which was so compelling to her. Compulsively she twisted, seeking him.

Reyna moaned, a half-stifled cry of passion as he slowly slipped the clinging fabric of the bikini from her. She turned her head into his shoulder and nipped a little savagely.

She shivered and whispered his name achingly as he slowly traced the line of her leg up to her hip. She felt his tongue as it surged into the tiny depression in her stomach. Then, as her fingers clutched violently into his neck he trailed his kisses lower. His roving hand teased and tantalized until suddenly it found its goal and closed over the dampening heat between her legs.

"Reyna!" he breathed in stark wonder. "You're on fire. I don't know how I've managed without you!"

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her, his legs pushing a little roughly now between hers. She wrapped him closer as the heavy strength of him seemed to satisfy a deep ache in her body. From head to toe, Reyna felt deliriously

as if she were one with him. Her cries were short, breathless sounds that gave him pleasure.

Ultimately the growing thread of spiraling passion snapped. Reyna shuddered convulsively as the bursting sensation took her. He let the shivers of completion wash through her, holding back his own satisfaction in order to enjoy hers first. When at last she began to descend, he gave in to his driving need, and she heard the muffled, indecipherable exclamation on his lips as he found his own thorough satisfaction. Slowly, languidly, they came down together.

Long moments passed in the rumped, moonlit bed. Reyna, her eyes still closed, was aware of the perspiration-damp warmth of Trev's body as he continued to sprawl across her. Her foot moved idly across the sheet.

He raised his head suddenly to meet her languorous gaze. "Ah, Reyna, after six months of trying to live with my own stupidity, I'm finally back where I want to be. This time everything will be different," he added resolutely. "I'll take care of your love this time. I swear it!"

She lowered her lashes before the intensity in him. All of a sudden his weight began to prove uncomfortable. She stirred beneath him.

"Reyna? I haven't even wanted to take another woman to bed in six months, only you."

"Poor Trev," she teased gently, touching the side of his cheek. "It must have been rough on you."

He shook his head as if still a little dazed at having found her in his arms again. "But everything is all right now."

"What do you want from me, Trev?" she whispered, a strange wariness crawling down her spine.

"The words you gave me last time. Reyna, tell me you love me."

She stiffened, and her mind recoiled instantly. "But I don't, Trev."

The golden eyes slit dangerously. "The hell you don't, Reyna Mackenzie!"

She saw the growing frustration and rage in him. Had he really believed that everything could be put back the way it had been six months ago with one night in bed?

"Trev, please, I'm sorry if you misunderstood, but I never misled you. I never implied I was still in love with you!"

He pinned her to the bed with his weight, and the menacing glitter in the amber eyes was totally unnerving. "You used me!" He looked thunderstruck at the realization.

"Trev, there's nothing wrong with two people finding a little pleasure in each other's arms," she began anxiously.

"You used me," he repeated as if he still couldn't believe it. "I came all this way to find a woman I thought loved me and she goes to bed with me because she happens to find me dynamite in the sack! Damn it to hell!" He moved, heaving himself off her in barely controlled fury. "You're going to sit there and tell me that you feel nothing more than a physical attraction now?" he rasped unbelievingly.

"There's nothing wrong with an affair based on physical attraction. It's all you ever felt for me six months ago!" she retorted.

"So what happens next?" he shot back. "I'm here for another eight days, remember? Are you planning on having a torrid affair with me for the remainder of my stay and then casually waving good-bye when I get on the plane to go back to Seattle?"

"Not if you're going to behave like this after sex!" she snapped.

"Why you little . . . !" Taking obvious hold of his raging temper, Trev paced to the foot of the bed, found his swim trunks and stepped into them. He stepped through the doorway and then caught hold of the jamb, turning back.

"You know something, Reyna MacKenzie? I don't believe you. I think you really do love me, and eight days from now you'll be getting on the plane with me!"

*

REYNA WAS reaching for the teapot the next morning when she sensed she was no longer alone. Her head snapped up, eyes widened, to find Trev moving quietly toward her across the expanse of the small garden. The sight of him in the morning sunlight made her swallow.

He ran an impatient hand through the carefully combed thickness of his dark hair. "I've come to apologize."

"What happened last night was no one's fault—"

"Don't be ridiculous," he interrupted sharply. "It was my fault. And I got what I deserved. My only excuse," he went on doggedly, "is that I've been thinking of no other woman except you for six long months. And I . . . I . . ." He broke off a little awkwardly.

"And you're not accustomed to going that long without sex," she finished for him, trying to sound placidly matter-of-fact. "Funny. My excuse runs along somewhat the same lines."

"Reyna," he began steadily, "I can't believe you no longer feel anything for me except a physical attraction."

Her mouth tightened. "That's because you're not too sure of the difference between love and desire yourself, Trev. It's hard for you to distinguish between the two."

"So my motives in being here are condemned out of hand because you don't think I'm capable of loving you the way I want to be loved?" he muttered quietly.

"I won't say you're not capable of it, only that I'm not the one to inspire it in you. If it had been going to happen, it would have happened six months ago. Don't look so stricken, Trev," she went

on, feeling more sure of herself as she spelled out the night's conclusions she'd reached. "It's not your fault!"

"Thank you for your compassionate understanding," he growled sarcastically. "But I'm not buying it, Reyna. I'm aware that I handled things badly last night, and I want to start over. I want to get to know the new Reyna Mackenzie."

"I don't want any more scenes, Trev," she said warily. It was the only thing she could think of to say.

"Neither do I!" he assured her. He fixed his gaze on the sea. "Just let me spend the remainder of my stay with you. I won't use the time to seduce you, I swear it."

"Especially since you'd blame me for using you afterward?" The gray-green eyes gleamed with humor.

"You never used to laugh at me, Reyna." He gave her a glance that echoed some of her humor.

"I guess I just never realized how amusing you could be at times." She grinned, aware of a shaft of pleasure at sharing the joke with him.

"Then let me amuse you for the next week or so," he persisted in a slow drawl. But the gold in his gaze was liquid as he watched her.

"It won't change anything, Trev."

"I'm willing to take the risk."

"You never take risks unless you expect to win," she pointed out.

He lifted a shoulder dismissively. "I doubt that you do either, as a rule."

"Except on one occasion," she concluded in a dry whisper.

"Honey," he growled. "Please."

Reyna came to a decision. For the life of her she wasn't certain what made her take the step.

"All right, Trev," she agreed with a faint inclination of her head. "Now, if you don't mind, this is my day off and I have some business to attend to."

"I'll come with you," he said at once.

"Trev, you can't possibly want to run around with me all day long!"

"Why not?" His hands fell to her shoulders. "What sort of business are we going to be handling today?"

"Real business, I'm afraid," she answered dryly. "I've got an appointment at the bank in Wailuku."

He glanced at her. "About financing for the gourmet shop?"

"Yes. Still want to tag along?"

"I'll have a look around the town while you're busy," he answered evasively.

TWO HOURS LATER Reyna emerged from the bank. Waiting patiently at the curb behind the wheel of his rental car, Trev sat reading a tourist guide. He glanced up expectantly as Reyna opened the passenger door and slid into the seat not looking at him. He turned slightly in the seat.

"Tell me how the meeting went," he commanded quietly.

"Oh, it was all business," she told him, glancing out at the street. "I'd rather not talk about it, Trev."

"What happened, Reyna?" he asked gently.

Her head swung around. The knowledge that Trev would probably find her bad news gratifying bit deep. "Let's go back to the hotel. I want to change out of these hot clothes."

"The answer was no?" he prodded, paying no attention to her attempt at controlling the situation.

"The answer," she said with deadly clarity, "was maybe."

He drew a deep breath. "And you're not accustomed to 'maybes,' are you? Tell me exactly what they said, Reyna."

Reyna shot Trev a rueful, slanting glance. "I could use a drink," she managed lightly. "Take me to lunch and I'll tell you everything."

He returned her weak smile with a hooded, searching glance and then he started the engine.

She poured out the tale over a glass of chilled Chenin Blanc while they munched the salted salmon with tomato and on-

ion called lomilomi. Trev listened in silence as she described the bank's reluctance to rush to her financial assistance.

"You're accustomed to having men like him rolling out the red carpet," Trev said with complete understanding.

"True." Reyna downed the last of her wine. "All I've been concerning myself with are the logistics of setting up the shop itself, not such things as collateral, credit ratings and other trivia! Well, right now it's back to the old drawing board." She stood up. "Let's go."

"You *are* in a foul mood," he noted admiringly as they walked to the street. "Are you going to take potshots at me all afternoon?"

Reyna wrinkled her nose at him as she slid into the car. "I'm going to work off my antagonism, I think. I'm going birding," she told him, making the decision on the spot.

That brought his head around. "I can't quite see you as a bird-watcher."

"Does that mean you won't be coming with me?" she challenged interestingly. "Giving up the attempt to get to know the new me already?"

His mouth firmed. "I'll go with you."

Reyna lifted one brow in skeptical amusement. "Perhaps after you get to know the new me, you won't want me anymore! Have you thought about that?"

He slammed the car door and leaned down to look at her through the open window.

"Reyna," he said softly, "you're not going to scare me off with a little bird-watching."

TREV LOWERED the field glasses through which he had been peering. They were lying on their stomachs on a cliff, well-concealed behind a lush patch of flowering vegetation. There were no birds in her line of sight at the moment, so she stared hard at the horizon instead.

"Look at me. Grass stains on my shirt and slacks, mud on my shoes..." He rolled onto his side, propping himself on one elbow.

For an instant their gazes locked and the familiar sexual tension flowed between them. Something feminine and primitive coursed down her spine. He was still the one man who could set fire to her blood.

"No," he growled in a low, grating whisper.

"No, what?" she breathed, aware of him with every inch of her body.

"No, I'm not going to make love to you," he stated, just as if he had been reading her mind. She felt the red stain on her cheeks. Far out at sea a bird wheeled and plunged headfirst toward the waves, seeking its prey.

"Thanks," she muttered dryly, eyeing his profile as he stared through the lenses. The breeze off the ocean was playing lightly with the thick darkness of his hair, revealing and concealing some of the silver in it. The line of his body held the easy strength and grace of a relaxed cat, she thought. She wanted to reach out and touch him.

And before she could stop herself, she had done exactly that.

"I said no." She could feel the coiled energy in him and she knew a curious sense of power at having been the cause of his instantaneous reaction.

The desire to prod him was growing. "You're so sure of yourself."

He hesitated. "Things become dangerous when they get out of control," he finally stated quietly.

"Am I out of your control now, Trev? Is that why you're so tense?" Holding her breath she trailed her fingers lightly through his dark hair.

"Perhaps," he allowed stiffly.

"You can't stand it when things aren't happening the way you want them to, can you?" she drawled. She wanted to show him that she could control a situation as well as he; that there were times when he

was not in charge—not the one to whose tune she would dance. She would at least make him admit he couldn't dictate the boundaries of their physical relationship.

He didn't move when she lightly feathered her lips along his in a coaxing, persuading movement. Slowly, with tender urgency, Reyna began making tiny circles on his shoulder.

"Damn it, Reyna," he groaned, "I won't let you do this to me...."

She didn't argue. Her nails slid beneath the collar of his shirt, scraping along his skin with exquisite sensitivity. She heard his answering moan and felt the tremor in his body.

"I want you, Trev," she moaned daringly and heard his muttered exclamation of surrender.

"My God, Reyna! I can't fight this. Why am I even bothering to try?"

"Let me make love to you, Trev," she murmured.

"Yes," he rasped, "make love to me. Love me, Reyna. *Love me.*"

She knew he was twisting the words, but she was too far gone along the path of sensual need to correct him. It was a joy to be able to provoke his surrender like this. A thrilling, challenging, incredibly exciting joy.

He gave in before her onslaught as if he were the sea: strong, potentially dominant, invariably dangerous but irresistibly yielding to her touch.

In a few moments she was naked beside him, her hair in tousled disarray around her shoulders. Under the hot sun, lying on a secluded cliff overlooking an ocean, Reyna made love to the man she had once loved.

With every thrilling, dangerous step, Reyna became more and more aware of the essence of his physical surrender. It tempted her, goaded her, pleased her. She loved watching him twist hungrily with his desire and she loved the heat beneath her fingers when she touched him.

The impact of their union sent a shudder through both of them. She set the pattern of their lovemaking, acting out of an overwhelming desire to give him the satisfaction he craved in that moment.

And then he was shouting his groaning, shuddering release into the silky skin of her breast. Reyna clung to him, gasping out his name as she found her own fulfillment a few seconds later. The hot sun beat down on their damp, exhausted bodies.

Reyna was a long time resurfacing. Dimly she was aware of the slow, absent glide of his hands on her body as he stroked her. Carefully she lifted her lashes, meeting his gaze.

He smiled, his gaze steady. "Having you make love to me is the closest I seem to be able to get to having your love right now. I told myself I wouldn't allow our physical attraction for each other to interfere with the direction in which I intended our relationship to go, but..." He broke off, shrugging philosophically.

"Trev...?" What was it about this moment that was so unnervingly familiar?

He sat up, effectively breaking the delicate moment, and grabbed for his shirt as a suddenly crisp breeze began to play with it. "Wind's coming up, honey. We'd better get dressed or we'll spend the rest of the afternoon chasing after our clothes!"

IT WASN'T until he had left her at her door after making arrangements to pick her up for dinner that Reyna finally realized what it was about Trev's response to her lovemaking that had elicited that strange sense of *déjà vu*.

He had surrendered to it in a way that reminded her of her own surrender six months ago.

*

THE FOLLOWING afternoon Reyna stood examining a bolt of authentic Indonesian batik in one of the many fascinating shops in Lahaina. She found herself staring at the exotic printed cotton and thinking instead of the previous day and evening.

Trev had taken her to dinner, his manner warm and attentive. Still, Reyna had experienced an edge of wariness throughout the evening. Would Trev now assume he would be spending every night of his stay in her bed?

She couldn't blame him for coming to such a conclusion after the way she had boldly seduced him! Even before that fateful scene she had implied she was willing to become involved in an affair.

The thought made her shut her eyes in momentary dismay and she dropped the length of fabric she had been examining.

She quickly removed herself from the shop.

Reyna wandered idly, going over and over in her mind the fire in Trev's good-night kiss. She had been prepared for a major skirmish at her door, but he had meekly accepted her cool attempt to send him back to his own room.

What did appear, however, was a curiously vulnerable expression in his amber eyes. Unconsciously Reyna bit her lip. The thought of being able to hurt Trev Langdon was as foreign as the idea that he could actually fall in love.

She knew her actions had confused him. They'd certainly confused her! But she had known from the outset of the evening that there would be no repeat performance of the afternoon's unnerving behavior!

The chaos it had created in her emotions still raged. She would never again be stupid enough to throw her heart away on a man who couldn't reciprocate.

When he had reappeared in her life, she'd been forced to accept the fact that

the sexual tension between them still held power. She had even accepted her own surrender to it—for a time. But it had thrown her yesterday when he'd literally surrendered to her. Afterward she had found herself waiting for recriminations or mockery. Neither had resulted. The disquieting follow-up had been her own surge of inner chaos.

She simply wasn't cut out to become involved in an affair that didn't contain the ingredient of love, Reyna decided with sudden understanding as she stood on the wharf and gazed across the protected Lahaina harbor. Her first attempt at such an involvement certainly wasn't proving very promising.

And what about Trev's actions? His recent surrender was as unnerving as her own behavior! It didn't fit the image she had of the man.

By the time she returned to the hotel Reyna had reached a decision. It would be best to put some distance between herself and Trev for the remainder of his stay. Whatever the ultimate source of her confusion and wariness, it was evident she no longer could deceive herself into thinking she could handle a simple affair with him.

REYNA CAUGHT the wave exactly right! Planing on chest and stomach, she rode it in to shore, body surfing almost all the way to the beach. She rose to her knees in the sand.

"I see you're picking up some new skills," remarked an all-too-familiar voice a few feet away.

She swung her head around, lurching to her feet. "Trev! What are you doing up? It's barely dawn!"

"I didn't sleep all that well last night," he told her laconically, coming closer. "How about you?"

Reyna muttered something under her breath, bending down to swish seawater against her sandy legs. It was an excuse not to meet his eyes.

"Will you teach me?" he asked quietly. He gestured out at the small series of breakers rolling in toward shore.

Suddenly Reyna couldn't resist testing him. "Okay, mainlander. Come on out here with me."

She led the way out to where the small waves began the curling that would take them foaming in toward shore and demonstrated how to judge the merits of each. Trev listened intelligently and then disgusted her completely by catching his first one perfectly.

"You've done this before!" she accused laughingly, as he was deposited neatly on the beach.

"Never!" he swore, heaving himself to his feet and glancing ruefully down at the coating of sand on his chest and thighs. "Does this look like the sort of sport I'd actively engage in on a routine basis?"

"You've got a point there," she was forced to agree.

"I'm going to do it again. It's fun!"

Trev managed to catch one good ride after another. The sea provided the medium needed to reestablish an easy communication. Reyna accepted it with a kind of wonder. When had Trev ever let himself go like this? It was becoming difficult to imagine him now in a business suit!

They were out of the neutral territory of the sea again, back on dry land and back into the morass of conflicting emotions which awaited her there. He sensed her changing mood at once.

"Don't be afraid of me, sweetheart," he murmured, taking hold of her towel and briskly drying her hair. "Didn't I leave on demand the other night?"

"I was hoping you wouldn't mention that!"

"Let's talk about tonight, then," he returned, taking her hand to start back toward the condo-hotel. "I thought we could have dinner down on the wharf in Lahaina."

"I can't," she said quickly. "I'm involved in putting on a beach luau for the hotel guests tonight."

He glanced assessingly down at her, his fingers tightening on her wrist. "Then I suppose I'll have to settle for seeing you there, won't I?" he noted evenly.

She blinked warily.

"I am one of the hotel guests," he reminded her.

"Oh. Yes, of course."

DUSK WAS BEGINNING TO SETTLE OVER THE ARAY OF LONG TABLES AND BENCHES, WHICH HAD BEEN CARRIED DOWN TO THE BEACH BY MEMBERS OF THE HOTEL STAFF WHEN REYNA AGAIN REALIZED SHE HADN'T SEEN ANY SIGN OF TREV.

TWO HOURS LATER EVERYTHING WAS MOVING SMOOTHLY. THE FOURLSOME HIRED TO PROVIDE THE ENTERTAINMENT PERFORMED WITH ROLICKING HUMOR AND GOOD HARMONY. STRUMMING UKULELES, THEY SANG THE LIVELY SONGS OF OLD HAWAII, AND THE GUESTS, MANY ON THEIR THIRD OR FOURTH RUM DRINK, HAD GOTTEN TO THE POINT OF JOINING IN. IT SIGNALIZED THE MOMENT WHEN SHE COULD FADE QUIETLY INTO THE BACKGROUND.

DRIFTING TO THE EDGE OF THE GOOD-NATURED CROWD, REYNA REALIZED THAT TREV'S FAILURE TO APPEAR WAS BEGINNING TO GET TO HER. DAMN IT! WHAT WAS THE MATTER WITH HER? THANK HEAVEN THERE WERE ONLY A FEW DAYS LEFT BEFORE HE WOULD RETURN TO SEATTLE.

She was creating lazy circles in the sand with her fingertips, knees drawn up to her chin, when she became aware of a quiet presence behind her.

"Any food left?" he asked quietly, moving forward to stand beside her.

REYNA SAW THE EXPENSIVE ITALIAN SHOES FIRST. SLOWLY HER EYES TRAVELED UP THE LENGTH OF THE LIGHTWEIGHT SLACKS OF THE REFINED SUIT. MUTELY, SHE TOOK IN THE SILK TIE, FORMAL SHIRT AND WELL-TAILORED JACKET.

"I was wondering how you'd look to me once you returned to wearing a suit," she remarked dryly. "I'd almost forgotten."

His mouth lifted sardonically and he began to shrug out of the jacket. "So had I. I've had a hard day," he drawled, going to work on the knot of the tie. "Do you think you could get me a plate of something? A drink would be nice, too," he went on thoughtfully. "Something with a good shot of rum in it."

"Where did you develop that look of humble appeal?" She got to her feet and dusted off her jeans.

"I've been working on it since you left Seattle," he said as she stalked off in the direction of the serving table.

She ladled out a variety of luau specialties and added a slice of coconut cake. Then she made a brief stop at the bar.

Reyna headed slowly back along the beach. Trev's tie had been removed completely, she saw in the flickering light of a nearby torch, and the shirt had been unbuttoned, its sleeves rolled up. He had even, she saw in surprise, taken off the elegant calfskin shoes.

She sat down beside him, handing over the tray. "What have you been doing, Trev?"

"I've been doing a little business," he announced quietly as he explored the other elements on his plate. "I took the noon plane over to Honolulu. I just got back an hour ago."

She stared at him as she sat cross-legged in the darkness beside him. Reyna's eyes widened. "Is that why you came all the way over here to Hawaii?" she breathed, staggered. "Because you had business in the islands?"

He managed to look a little more exhausted. "You're the only reason I came to Hawaii, Reyna," he stated flatly, and Reyna couldn't explain the curious sense of relief she was experiencing. "The matter came up after I arrived on Maui." He half-smiled. "Your luau appears to have been a success." He glanced meaningfully toward the cheerful crowd.

She said nothing, sensing a new kind of tension creeping into the air between them. There was something different

about Trev tonight and she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

Then he dropped the small bombshell into the thickened atmosphere.

"I'll be leaving in the morning, Reyna."

Her head snapped up and she found the bonds of his amber gaze waiting to trap her. "Leaving! But you're booked here for a few more days." She scanned his face.

He looked at her levelly. "You've convinced me you don't have any intention of leaving the islands, honey. There's not much point in my staying and trying to talk you into coming back with me, is there?"

"No," she got out carefully. She felt as if she had been thrown into a cold sea.

"So I'm going back by myself."

"I see." She tore her eyes away from his and stared blindly down at the contours of the sand.

Reyna met his eyes again. She could feel the desire in him reaching out to her and it sent familiar shivers along her nerves.

"Spend tonight with me," he pleaded harshly, reaching out a hand to take hold of one of hers. "Reyna, I need you tonight!"

She felt paralyzed, utterly torn between the promise of passion, her unidentified fear of another night in his arms and the need to respond to the urgent pleading in his eyes. *In the morning he would be gone. This time for good.*

"Please," he whispered hoarsely, pulling her gently forward and brushing his mouth against her lips. "Please. I need you so much. You used to love me once. Love me again, Reyna. One last time."

His hand moved through her hair, twining itself in the tawny mass.

"Oh, Trev..." She crumbled before the onslaught of her unexpectedly strong need to satisfy the pleading, beseeching urgency in him.

His hand tightened in her hair. The amber gaze gleamed.

HE SANK DOWN onto the bed beside her, reaching for her. Slowly, with infinite care, he undressed her, his mouth clinging to her lips as if he drew strength there.

"Trev?"

"Don't ask me to hurry tonight, darling," he breathed into her hair. "I have to store the memories. The winters in Seattle are cold and rainy, remember?"

For a moment Reyna's throat tightened on a sudden urge to cry. Trev's hands seemed to drift across her body, the texture slightly, excitingly rough on her soft skin. Reyna sighed then with a heated pleasure, letting herself think of nothing else except the joy of response.

"I want to learn every inch of you one more time," he whispered hoarsely, tracing an erotic pattern down the length of her spine.

"I want you, Trev...."

She thought he hesitated, as if her words weren't quite what he had expected, but he met her gaze in the darkness. Then he moved heavily, irresistibly against her, forcing a union that in that moment seemed utterly right, utterly unbreakable.

It culminated much later in a staggering, totally satisfying release that wrung a stifled shout of elemental triumph from Trev and a panting, nearly soundless cry of ecstasy from Reyna.

For long, precious moments Reyna held herself still, aware of Trev's steady-ing breath as his head rested on her breast. There were no words readily available to describe her emotions in that moment. The night itself would soon be over. A kind of sadness was threatening to well up and inundate the remains of her sensual satisfaction. Desperately she sought to halt the flood.

"Reyna?"

Trev stirred, lifting himself a little so that he could look down into her face. He drew in his breath, and a small, fleeting

smile edged his lips. "The reason I went to Honolulu, sweetheart..."

Reyna blinked. Whatever she had ex-pected him to say in the aftermath of their lovemaking, it had nothing to do with his business trip to Oahu!

He bent to drop a tiny kiss on the tip of her nose. "I went away this afternoon so that I could make arrangements to give you the one thing you seem to want."

"I don't... I don't understand." Eyes wide and questioning, Reyna tried to comprehend. "What have you done?"

"Arranged the loan. It's what I'm good at, remember?" he added whimsically. "Arranging capital for new busi-nesses? I saw the people who count today at the main office of that bank where you're applying for the loan. The local branch won't give you any more trouble. Believe me."

"You—" Stunned, Reyna broke off her words, licked her dry lips and started again. "You guaranteed the loan?"

"Let's just say I convinced them you're a solid risk, sweetheart," he murmured. "There's nothing standing in your way now. You can build the gourmet-shop business to your heart's content. It's the thing you seem to want."

Before she could pull herself together enough to figure out the subtle layers of meaning in his actions, he was stopping her thoughts with a kiss. Reyna somehow found it easier to give herself over once more to the world of sensation. It was easier than trying to think about what had just happened.

The night was patient with them, al-lowing time for their desire to build and find satisfaction again and again before a deep exhaustion finally claimed them.

But tired as she was, Reyna couldn't fall asleep beside Trev. What had he done to her?

SLOWLY, as the first rays of dawn crept into the room, a strange rage began to flicker through her body. He had found a way to rid himself of the guilt she had

once guessed he felt. Now he would go back to Seattle. He was going to discard her again. Again!

Her hand curled into a fist, the nails biting into the palm: How dare he? Who the hell did Trev Langdon think he was?

The six months of time stretching between their fiery encounters dissolved as if they had never existed. Reyna sat on the edge of the bed, clutching the sheet to her breast, and stared at the man who had hurled her love back in her face six months ago. In that moment she could easily have turned on him with her fists.

She had squandered the gift of her love on this man and he had rejected it. Now she realized that the emotions she'd had to suppress six months ago had never really disappeared.

Shaking like a leaf, Reyna slid from the bed, reaching for her clothing. She didn't know how to handle this twice-fueled fire burning in her.

Her mind spun into gear, remembering his "gift." She turned back to stare in narrow-eyed fury at Trev's sleeping form. She would not let him off the hook so easily.

She would take no favors or gifts from this man. In her living room she found her checkbook. Her fingers were trembling badly as she picked up the pen. The standard fee for arranging financing was a percentage. She wrote out the check with passion. This small revenge was worth any price. Trev could go back to Seattle, but he would not have had the satisfaction of wringing another confession of love from her, nor of salving his conscience by giving her a gift to compensate for the destruction of her former career.

Check in hand, Reyna once again made her way to the bedroom. She left the check on the dresser, where he could not fail to see it.

Then, with one last look at the man who had wrought new chaos into her life,

Reyna fled down to the beach. At the water's edge she began to run.

She ran without any thought of pacifying herself, intent only on burning up the reckless energy. In only a few moments she was breathless. The red-hot rage was dying. She could feel it seeping out of her body at last. After six long months it was finally evaporating.

So why was she beginning to cry?

Horrified, Reyna brushed the back of her hand against her damp lashes. She was crying! She thought about Trev waking to find the check and the tears fell harder. Coming to a halt, she stared uncomprehendingly out to sea.

The brain she had thought was functioning so clearly under the impetus of fury was finally becoming clear, indeed.

She realized she was frightened at the dawning implications. Terribly frightened. It meant she would have to view his gift of the financing arrangements in much the same light as her gift to him six months ago when she had said she would halt the takeover of his brother-in-law's firm.

A gift of love.

Had he given her the one thing he had that he knew she wanted? A gift of love in the hope that his love would be returned, but hers to keep, regardless?

She no longer wanted revenge, she realized, terrified. She still loved Trevor Langdon.

The realization swept to the surface with far greater force than the earlier rage, freed by the release of the darker emotion. She loved Trev just as she had loved him six months ago. Nothing had changed, except...

Spinning around, Reyna stared back at the quiet hotel grounds and then she was running again, faster than she had ever run in her life.

*

TREV STOOD in front of the dresser wearing only the khaki trousers. He was staring down at the check in his hand.

"You must hate my guts." Trev looked stricken. He glanced down at the check in his hand and Reyna knew intuitively that he was searching for a way to handle the situation just as she had searched for one six months ago. If he chose the method she had chosen—that of cool withdrawal—they would lose everything again. "I deserve it," he said quietly.

His words, his expression, perhaps the way she herself was reliving that morning of six months ago from the opposite side of the fence—whatever it was—something finally broke through Reyna's paralysis. She flung herself across the room.

"Trev, no! No! I came to take it back. I didn't realize..." Reyna grabbed at the check in his hand.

His arms came around her as he staggered backward under the impetus of her forceful rush.

She buried her face in his bare shoulder, holding him tightly. "I didn't realize I wasn't the only one who knew about love," she managed in muffled tones. "I couldn't give you any credit for having learned to love because that would have meant . . ."

"Facing your true feelings for me again?" His head nestled alongside hers.

"I'd buried them, Trev. If you hadn't come back—" She broke off, and Reyna lifted her head slightly to meet the naked expression in his eyes. "When did you realize you loved me, Trev?"

He shook his head in a dazed fashion. "I'm not sure. I only knew that life was intolerable without you. I didn't think about the fact that I had fallen in love for the first time in my life until you began accusing me of not being able to love."

"I was protecting myself by saying that," she mused, her eyes turning very green.

"It was easier on you to think I couldn't experience any deep emotions?" he hazarded.

"I told myself only your pride was at stake. And maybe a few twinges of your conscience."

He closed his eyes briefly. "That's why you left the check this morning?"

"Yes. Oh, Trev, I was so angry. By dawn I wanted to lash out at you in the only way I could, by making your no-strings-attached gift into a business arrangement. If nothing else, I thought I could deny you your conscience appeaser. But you didn't arrange the loan for that purpose, did you?"

"No," he whispered. "I love you, Reyna. I honestly don't know when I fully realized it."

She smiled wonderingly.

"Sweetheart, that night I carried you off the beach and back to your bed, when you calmly told me you didn't see why we couldn't have an affair, I was stunned." He tugged her close again, his lips in her hair.

"I wasn't at all prepared to admit it could be anything more than that. I soon realized that sex with you was still too dangerous to handle."

"So you tried sending me away the other night."

"And you went, which surprised the hell out of me when I thought about it later," Reyna concluded on the first thin note of humor.

He was still for an instant. "I didn't want to give you another reason to hate me."

"You've changed since you arrived on Maui, Trev."

"I'm aware of that," he retorted a little dryly. His hands slid up to her shoulders and he held her a small distance away, scanning her face. "You took a certain malicious pleasure in trying to

force me to adapt to island life, didn't you?"

"Guilty as charged," she admitted with a tiny grin. "At first it was a way of showing you how different we are now, how impossible it would be for me to ever come back to you. But somewhere along the line you began to look right here. Are you really going to go back to Seattle today?"

He hesitated.

"Trev?" she prodded curiously.

"I told myself yesterday that I would risk everything on an all-or-nothing play. If I could get you to come willingly to my bed once more and while you were there give you the one thing you seemed to want..."

"You thought it might break down the barriers?"

"I hoped it would," he said, sighing. "But if that didn't work, I was prepared to go on trying. I couldn't bring myself to give up. I had to believe I could make you love me again. But I knew you must be harboring a fairly deep anger...."

She looked up at him. "Are all financiers such excellent amateur psychologists?"

"The successful ones are," he joked tenderly. "It's a job requirement. But no amount of grounding in psychoanalysis could have prepared me for what you were offering six months ago. I was a fool not to recognize love when it was handed to me. I kept trying to equate it with physical attraction, with gamesmanship, with business. I don't suppose I fully understood it, even though I knew I wanted it, until I was trying to hand it back to you."

"Yes," she whispered. "That's when you realize what you've got. When you're trying to give it."

His fingers worked at the nape of her neck as he studied her face with a familiar intentness. "What happened to you this morning?"

"I wrote out that check and then I went down to the beach and admitted to

myself just how much I hated you for what you'd done to me six months ago," she said starkly.

The pain came and hovered in his eyes, but he didn't release his gentle grip on her neck. "And then?"

"And then I cried." She touched his jaw with a sensitive fingertip. "I'd forgotten to do that six months ago, you see. There wasn't time. Oh, Trev, it was after the tears came that I realized you might be feeling the same as I had felt six months ago. I couldn't bear the thought. I came running back here to destroy the check but it was too late—you'd already seen it."

He folded her tightly to him. "Honey, we could spend the rest of our lives rehashing how close we came to disaster. I think there are better ways of spending the time."

"Such as?"

"Such as furthering my adaptation to island life," he retorted blandly.

"What?" She had been prepared for a not-so-subtle comment about making love.

"I mean I like seeing you here in the sun. Furthermore, I like being here myself, much to my surprise. I've been seduced by you and by the islands. I'm going to stay."

She stared at him, astounded. "Are you out of your mind? You've got a business to run back in Seattle. The city is your natural element!"

"Not any longer. I could run a branch of Langdon & Associates here in the islands. Having the office in Seattle will give us an excuse to return to the mainland once in a while and put on business suits. What do you say, honey? Will you marry me and take me birding and body surfing and feed me papayas in the mornings?"

"Oh, yes, Trev. Oh, yes!" She tightened her arms around his neck and leaned in to him for his kiss, her happiness a tangible force surrounding both of them. "And you don't have to think

you're giving up everything you like about city life. That's the beauty of Hawaii. There's a way to have it all here."

"As long as I've got you, I've got it all," he said huskily.

Reyna vibrated to the sensual tone of his voice and arched against him. The

laughter died out of her eyes, to be replaced by unmasked longing and love.

"Love me, my island woman," he commanded with heavy passion. "Love me for always."

"For always," she agreed, lacing her fingers behind his head and finding his mouth with hers.



**Solution to
CROSSWORD #11
Vol. 2 No. 5**

METAL	IRMA	CELL
ALONE	NEAR	AREA
SLIDE	TART	BRAN
TALE	PELE	ORE
	STORM	ACORNS
DEN	INN	SCAR
DRESSY	SPENDER	
TASK	BAY	EXAM
	STUDIED	THRICE
	NOTE	LEO TEN
SMOKES	RANTS	
TAP	PANT	HAHA
ORAL	ERIC	ROMAN
NILE	VASE	ARENT
EAST	EYES	HENDS



GINNA GRAY

The Perfect Match



Maggie was determined not to give in to her attraction to Clinton Rafferty. But with Clint, his daughter and her own daughter pitted against her, the battle was waged with often hilarious intensity.

Standing in the shadows to one side of the set, Maggie Trent waited impatiently for the show's wrap-up. The director switched to camera two, bringing all the guests into the final shot, and Alex very politely thanked each one in turn, but Maggie noticed the way his eyes kept returning to the voluptuous young actress. Maggie shook her head. Men! They were all the same.

"This portion of 'Houston Today,' with host Alex Crenna, has been brought to you by Sporting Chance, the Southwest's quality sporting goods stores," announced Harvey Goodman as the credits flashed across the screen.

A moment later Maggie's own name appeared, as producer, and after it that of the show's director. Maggie picked up her briefcase and started forward.

"Alex, could I speak with you for a moment?"

Alex broke off his conversation with the young starlet.

"What's up, boss lady?" His handsome face split into a dazzling white smile.

"I just had a call from Henry Burk," Maggie replied. "He wants us to have lunch with him and his new partner on Monday."

Alex's blond brows rose. "Henry has taken on a *partner*?"

"Apparently so. I got the impression that the new man isn't that sold on sponsoring the show."

"Who is this partner?"

"I don't know," Maggie admitted. "All Henry would tell me was that the man's a well-known sports figure. They're keeping the whole deal hush-hush until they're ready to release the news to the press. But we're going to have to do a selling job. Their contract comes

up for renewal next month. If we lost Henry the show could go off the air."

"You know I'll do whatever I can to help," Alex assured her.

Though Alex viewed his role as host of Houston's most popular local talk show as a stepping stone, he knew very well it was an important one.

"Selene will be there also, since her agency is handling all the publicity for Sporting Chance. She'll give us whatever support she can." Maggie slipped into the cream suit jacket she'd been carrying. "But for now, I intend to put it out of my mind and enjoy a relaxing weekend. I'm bushed."

Alex fell in step beside her. "In that case, I don't suppose I could talk you into dinner and a bit of dancing afterward?"

The woebegone look on his handsome face drew a chuckle from Maggie. Since her divorce from Larry, she and Alex had dated casually. They were friends, but nothing more. Alex was too wrapped up in his career, and Maggie had been burned too badly to want any sort of emotional involvement.

"Sorry. Not tonight—even if I had the energy. Laura's new friend Allison is spending the weekend."

LAURA TRENT flopped down onto the padded bench in the lobby of Miss Ludmilla Brovnic's Dance Academy and stared at her friend. "Oh, Allison, I don't think that's a very good idea," she croaked.

"Nonsense. My father and your mother are perfect for each other." A bead of perspiration escaped Allison Rafferty's black ponytailed hair and trickled down the side of her face. She wiped it away, then propped a foot on the

bench and began to unlace her ballet slippers. "All we have to do is get them together."

"You don't understand," Laura wailed. "If my mother finds out we set the whole thing up, she'll kill me!"

"She won't find out. Just leave everything to me."

"But you told me yourself your father isn't interested in getting married again. And I know my mother isn't," Laura insisted.

"Don't worry." Allison grasped her friend's hands. "Laura, your mom is super. She's just the kind of woman my dad should marry, and if they do, you and I will be sisters. We'll be a family."

"There's your mom now," Allison said, glancing out the window. "Gee, just look at her. She's something else."

Unaware of being watched, Maggie strode confidently toward the entrance, her pleated skirt swirling around her shapely legs. A beguiling smile curved her mouth as she savored the subtle tang of fall in the air. With every jaunty step her shoulder-length, mahogany hair swung like a shining brown bell. At thirty-three she knew she was attractive. She had once longed to be glamorous, but a too-wide mouth, large blue eyes, and a slightly turned-up nose gave her oval face a girl-next-door prettiness. Any dissatisfaction about herself was due to her size. She had always longed to be tall and willowy; instead, she was stuck with a petite, curvy body.

Just as Maggie reached the school entrance, Laura and Allison stepped outside.

"Hi, girls," she greeted, leaning over to give her daughter a quick kiss on the cheek. "Are you two ready for your big weekend?"

"Sure, Mom."

"You bet, Mrs. Trent. Except that..." Allison gave Maggie a doubtful look. "Well... I forgot to bring my skates. Could you take me by my house to pick

them up? I'd call my dad to bring them over, but he's out on a date tonight."

Maggie placed an arm around each girl's shoulders, turning them toward the car. "Of course. It will only take a minute."

During the short drive the two girls chattered away nonstop. They had met only a few weeks ago at the beginning of school, but already they were fast friends. Maggie had learned from Allison that her mother had died five years before. She and her father had recently moved to Houston from San Antonio.

She hadn't met Mr. Rafferty yet, but on the phone he had seemed quite amiable, and also a loving, concerned parent. He had put her through the third degree before allowing Allison to spend the weekend.

When they pulled in to the Rafferty drive, the pillared, two-story colonial home was in darkness. Allison let them in with her key and turned on the dim foyer light, then moved toward the arched opening on the right. Maggie and Laura followed. Groping along the wall, Allison located the switch and flipped it up. Immediately the room was flooded with light.

"What the hell!"

The muffled explanation drew three pairs of rounded eyes to the sofa just as a couple scrambled up from its depths.

Gaining his feet, the man whirled to face the trio. When he spied Allison, his face was livid.

"Allison! What the devil are you doing here? You're supposed to be with your friend."

"I am... I was... I mean..." She waved vaguely at Maggie. "This is Laura's mother, Mrs. Trent."

For just an instant the man looked embarrassed, a faint flush running up beneath his tanned skin, but then blazing green eyes leveled on Maggie like twin laser beams. "I see. Then may I ask exactly what you're doing here, Mrs. Trent?"

Or do you make it a habit to barge into a person's home unannounced?"

Maggie stared. This...this *hunk* was Allison's *father*? Never in her life had she seen a more rawly masculine man. Broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped, and positively oozing sex appeal, he towered over her five-foot-two frame by more than a foot. In his mid- to late thirties, and evidently in superb physical shape, he was a stunning example of a man in his prime.

"I...uh...that is..."

"I'm waiting for an explanation, Mrs. Trent."

"Daddy!" Allison interceded, scandalized. "I can't believe you're talking to Mrs. Trent this way! It's hardly her fault you got caught making out on the couch."

His attention switched to Allison. "Now see here, young lady..."

Maggie was so struck by the man's overwhelming presence she was barely aware of the heated discussion that flared between father and daughter as she continued her inspection.

Clinton Rafferty's face had a bony, chiseled look that just saved it from being too handsome. The bold blade of a nose bore a telltale bump on its bridge: testimony to its having been broken, at least once. All in all, he was the most attractive, virile-looking man she had ever seen.

And the angriest.

Snapping out of her daze, Maggie stepped to Allison's side. "Allison, dear, don't worry about it. I can understand perfectly why your father is upset." When his nostrils began to flare, she added pleasantly, "I really am sorry we walked in at such an...uh...inconvenient time, but you see, Allison forgot her skates."

Now that Maggie's initial shock had worn off, the situation was beginning to take on humorous overtones. There was a wicked sparkle in her eyes as she noted Rafferty's disheveled appearance. His

black hair was sticking up in spikes, there was a bright red lipstick smear all around his mouth, and he was bare from the waist up.

Maggie's mouth curled up at the corners when her gaze switched to his companion. She was tall, blond, gorgeous, and busty. Taking in the scene with a blank, bovine look, she seemed oblivious to the fact that her dress was unbuttoned to her navel, her unfettered breasts in danger of complete exposure.

Hurriedly, Maggie looked away, her eyes darting around in search of a diversion.

To one side of the room the remains of a steak dinner were growing cold on a small candle-lit table set for two. Soft, romantic music spilled from stereo speakers.

Bubbling laughter began working its way up Maggie's throat, but she pushed it down. The scene was so obviously set for seduction it was hilarious. *Poor man. No wonder he's so upset.*

Allison's father cleared his throat noisily. "Yes, well, in that case, I apologize. Why don't you sit down, Mrs. Trent, while the girls go fetch the skates," he said. Putting on his shirt, he stalked to the bar in the corner. Maggie bit down hard on her lower lip when he saw his reflection in the mirrored wall and hastily snatched up a cocktail napkin to wipe away the telltale red smear. She perched on the edge of the sofa, torn between hysterical laughter and acute embarrassment.

"Could I get you a drink, Mrs. Trent?" The question was asked with forced politeness.

"No, thank you."

He returned with two drinks and handed one to the young woman, who sat down beside Maggie.

"Aren't you gonna introduce me, sugar?" the blonde asked.

He winced at the endearment but stretched his mouth into a parody of a smile. "Of course. I'm terribly sorry.

Bunny, meet Mrs. Trent. Mrs. Trent, this is Bunny Peters."

"Bunny? As in rabbit?" The question popped out before Maggie could stop it. The young woman didn't seem in the least offended.

"Yes. Don't you just *love* it? My real name is Barbara, but I think Bunny suits me better. You know, 'cause they're always so soft and cuddly."

Maggie stared at her and blinked. Good heavens! The woman's got a forty bustline and an IQ to match, she thought dazedly.

Looking up, Maggie surprised a chagrined expression on Clinton Rafferty's face. So he's embarrassed by his girl-friend's inane blathering, is he? Good! That's what he gets for romancing juveniles, she told herself gleefully. The girl couldn't have been a day over twenty-one.

At that moment the girls erupted into the room, and Maggie sighed with relief. She wasn't sure how much longer she could hold her mirth in check.

"I've got my skates, so we're ready to go anytime you are, Mrs. Trent," Allison announced.

Her father walked them to the car and stood by as they buckled themselves in and locked the doors. When she had switched on the ignition, Maggie lowered the window. "Good night, Mr. Rafferty. I'm sorry we intruded." Then some perverse imp of mischief made her add in a low voice only he could hear, "I'd be careful if I were you. Bunnies are said to be terribly prolific, you know."

*

"GEE, MRS. TRENT, I'm sorry about that. I didn't know my dad was going to cook dinner for his date tonight."

"Oh, but you told me—" Laura was cut off by a sharp poke in the ribs from Allison.

Maggie was too preoccupied to question the bit of byplay. She was appalled

by her own behavior. What had possessed her to make such an outrageous statement? Clinton Rafferty's love life was certainly no business of hers. He was probably livid, and he had every right to be.

"I just wish my dad would date someone nice for a change," Allison said, sighing wistfully. "His taste in women is the pits."

Hours later, curled up on the living room sofa, pretending to watch the late show with the girls, Maggie still could not dismiss Allison's words from her mind. She didn't know who she felt sorrier for—the girl or her father.

Clinton Rafferty was obviously a womanizer. It was easy to recognize the breed. She'd been married to one for eleven years.

Maggie sighed, and for the first time in months allowed herself to think of Larry. Only during their courtship and the early days of their marriage had she been truly happy. She had been both thrilled and proud when Larry Trent, star quarterback of their college football team and big man on campus, had given her the rush. They were married only a week after his graduation but Maggie soon realized that for Larry the chase was everything.

How many times in those eleven years had he strayed? And how many times had she forgiven him? The end came for Maggie when she returned from a business trip to find him in bed, *their* bed, with a girl still in her teens, and ten-year-old Laura asleep in the next room.

The divorce had become final over two years ago, and despite Maggie's worries, Laura seemed quite content with a single parent.

But what about Allison? She was fond of the girl and longed to help in some way.

One thing was certain, however, she decided as the TV screen went blank. She would have to apologize to Mr. Rafferty. The girls' friendship was more impor-

tant than scoring points off some arrogant, self-centered male.

After her usual jog in the park, Maggie spent the next morning doing housework. With Allison's help, Laura finished her share of the chores in short order, and the two took off for the skating rink.

By shortly after twelve the house was sparkling. Maggie was hot, tired, and grubby. She longed for a cool shower, but there was one job left to do.

She took shampoo from the cabinet and lifted the large, galvanized washtub from its hook on the utility room wall.

The moment she stepped out onto the patio an enormous Great Dane came loping across the yard, barking a greeting, only to skid to a halt when he spied the washtub. Ears went back, as he looked up at her accusingly. The staccato barking became a mournful whine.

Maggie gave the dog a stern look. "Now you can just cut that out, Tiny, because it's not going to do you one bit of good. It's time for your bath, so just get over here."

For the next half-hour Tiny stood semi-docilely while Maggie lathered and scrubbed. When at last he was clean and rinsed, Maggie made him step out of the tub, then took cover, laughing as Tiny shook himself, sending out water fifteen feet in every direction. When he had finished, she patted him with an old towel and led him into the utility room where he was to stay until thoroughly dry.

Maggie had just started for the stairs when the doorbell rang.

"Oh, good grief! What now?" She stalked toward the front door, her bare feet making small slapping sounds on the parquet floor. Without thinking, she jerked the door open and immediately sucked in a startled breath.

Gone was the disheveled man of the night before. Today Clinton Rafferty's thick black hair was brushed and smooth, his face newly shaved. He wore a green cotton shirt and a pair of faded jeans that fit his long muscular thighs like

a second skin. The top three buttons of the casual shirt were open, revealing a thatch of dark hair covering a broad, bronzed chest.

Maggie looked up and met his eyes. They were emerald. Glittering. Mesmerizing.

Maggie's heart began to pound. She was suddenly aware of her bare feet, the tacky cutoffs and T-shirt.

Why did he have to show up when I look like an unmade bed? What difference does it make, she derided herself.

Taking a deep breath, she forced a smile. "Good afternoon, Mr. Rafferty. Won't you come in?"

"Hello, Mrs. Trent." Once inside he handed her a paper sack. He seemed ill at ease. "Allison forgot her allergy medicine. I thought she might need it."

"Well, I...uh...I'll be sure and give it to her." Maggie added hesitantly, "I'm afraid the girls aren't here right now. They've gone to the skating rink."

"I see."

Gathering her courage, Maggie drew herself up to her full five feet two inches. "Mr. Rafferty, about last night," she began. "I want to apologize for my remark. I'm afraid I have a rather cock-eyed sense of humor, and sometimes it gets the best of me."

He eyed her intently. "Apology accepted."

Maggie sighed with relief. "Thank you."

"I think, for the girls' sake, we should wipe the slate clean and start over." Clint smiled. "Don't you?"

"Yes, I'm sure that would be best."

Eyes twinkling, he stuck out his hand. "How do you do, Mrs. Trent. I'm Clinton Rafferty."

After the merest hesitation, Maggie grinned and accepted the handshake, feeling a tingling sensation race up her arm. Silently chiding herself, she pulled her hand free. "Look, I was about to get cleaned up, then have lunch. If you

wouldn't mind waiting a few minutes, I'd be happy to have you join me."

"Why don't you show me the kitchen and let me get started on lunch while you shower?" His teasing smile made Maggie's insides quiver strangely. "I open a mean can of soup."

"Oh, I don't know..." Maggie looked at him uncertainly. She was torn between her duty as a hostess and the desire to shed the grubby clothes and shower. The shower won. She led the way to the kitchen at the back of the house.

"Very nice," he said, taking in the cheery, functional room. Blue and white checkered wallpaper covered the walls above white painted wainscoting. The countertops were white marble, the backsplash covered with hand-painted blue-and-white delft tiles. The cabinets were a rich pecan wood.

"Thanks," she replied, placing a can of tomato soup on the counter. "The pots are in the cabinet next to the dishwasher, and there are sandwich makings in the refrigerator. Oh!"

The word came out in a startled gasp when Maggie turned to find Clinton Rafferty standing only a few inches away.

He grinned wickedly and leaned forward, bracing his arms on either side of her. Swallowing hard, her eyes growing round, Maggie flattened herself against the pantry door.

"You're a little bitty thing, aren't you," he observed in a husky voice.

Maggie's mouth dropped open, then a blue flame leaped in her eyes. "Now just a darned minute...."

"But I will say, you're curved in all the right places and perfectly proportioned," he continued. "And you've got great legs. In that getup you look like a pint-size pinup. How is a man supposed to resist?"

Maggie fully intended to tell him, but before she could form the scathing retort, his mouth covered hers in a burning kiss that made her toes curl.

He wasted no time claiming the territory her parted lips had left open as his tongue quickly delved into the sweetness of her mouth, stroking, probing, rubbing against hers with bold familiarity.

He was only touching her with his lips, yet their warm, insistent pressure held her pinned against the door. Maggie's heart was knocking against her ribs. She was so stunned she couldn't have moved if her life depended on it.

But her sensory perception was still acute. She was sharply aware of the musky male scent of him, mingled with a hint of soap and a spicy masculine cologne, of the taste of him in her mouth, the heat that radiated from his body. She felt on fire all the way to the soles of her feet.

The kiss seemed to go on and on, but just when Maggie thought her knees would buckle, he drew away and smiled down at her with lazy, male satisfaction.

Maggie stared back, her eyes unblinking. As her breathing slowed to normal her mind cleared, and with the clearing came rationality. Following close on its heels was anger.

"What the devil do you think you're doing?" she demanded, glaring up at him with blue eyes flaming.

"Why, I'm just following directions." Clint grinned, his green eyes twinkling as he pointed to her shirt.

Bewildered, Maggie looked down and gasped. She used Laura's old, discarded T-shirts for jogging and working around the house. This morning she had slipped on a clean one without giving it a thought. Now Maggie flushed as she realized that emblazoned across her breasts in bold script were the words "Kiss me, you fool!"

"Now listen to me, Mr. Rafferty! When I agreed to start over, I meant as friends, as fellow parents, nothing more. Is that clear? *Whatever* gave you the idea you could come waltzing in here and treat me like one of your little Playboy bunnies!"

"Feisty little thing, aren't you," he said, grinning.

"*Mr. Rafferty.*" His name was ground out through clenched teeth, a warning implicit in the tone.

"Okay, okay. If that's the way you want it," he said, chuckling. "Now why don't you scoot on upstairs and have that shower while I get started on our lunch."

Maggie stared, torn between lingering anger and astonishment. Just like that, he was going to dismiss the whole episode? At a loss, she watched him search the cabinets for a pot, then finally she turned on her heel and walked out.

Spurred on by the knowledge that there was a strange male loose in her kitchen, Maggie showered and washed her hair in record time. After dressing in a pair of cinnamon slacks and a cinnamon-and-white striped pullover, she padded to the closet and surveyed the shoes lined up neatly on the rack along one wall. They were all high-heeled except for her scruffy jogging shoes and a pair of fuzzy house slippers. One of the disadvantages of being only five foot two, Maggie reflected, was that you spent half your time tottering around on high heels in an effort to look taller, only to spend the other half barefoot because your feet hurt so damned much. Today she needed the extra boost that high heels gave her, not only in height, but in confidence.

When she entered the kitchen Clint was just ladling the steaming tomato soup into two bowls. The table in the breakfast nook was set, and in the center sat a platter heaped with ham-and-cheese sandwiches.

"My, you *have* been busy," Maggie commented.

He looked up from his chore and grinned, quickly taking in the changes in her appearance, from her shining hair all the way down to the spike heels.

Maggie crossed to the refrigerator. "What would you like to drink? Ice tea, soft drink, or milk?"

"Tea will be fine." He placed the soup on the table while Maggie filled the glasses, then held her chair politely.

Neither spoke for several minutes. To Maggie's disgust, she found his nearness unsettling. *If only he weren't so damned good to look at.*

He took a sandwich, sank his teeth into it, and chewed with relish.

"What do you do for a living, Mr. Rafferty?" Maggie asked, determined to squelch the unsettling reactions. "I don't believe Allison has ever said."

He smiled at her. "My name is Clinton. Most people call me Clint."

Unaccountably tongue-tied under his intent stare, Maggie took a quick sip of tea and cleared her throat. "Mine's Maggie. Well, actually it's Margaret."

"Maggie?" He looked up sharply, his expression thoughtful. "I believe Allison said something about you being in television. What is it you do, exactly?"

"I'm the producer of 'Houston Today.' That's an afternoon talk show," she added.

To Maggie's amazement his expression became even more somber. Did he have something against television?

"You still haven't told me what business you're in," she reminded him.

He smiled, seeming to shake off his preoccupation. "I guess you could say I'm in retail sales."

His eyes twinkled at her mysteriously, and for a second Maggie forgot to breathe. Then she pulled herself up short and took another bite of her sandwich. *Easy, girl, easy. The man may be charming and sexy as hell, but he's still a rogue. And you'd be wise not to forget it.*

When they finished, Clint helped her clear the table, then stood watching as she loaded the dishwasher. Maggie kept the conversation centered on the girls and their blossoming friendship—a safe topic. Clint was obviously a loving father, deeply concerned about his daughter's happiness. He seemed as pleased as she about the bond between the girls.

When the kitchen was clean, Clint pushed himself away from the counter. "Well, I guess I'd better be going. Thanks for the lunch."

"Thank you for preparing it," Maggie said sincerely.

There was a sudden cry of alarm from the back of the house, followed by a hair-raising animal yowl that sent Tiny into a paroxysm of barking.

Startled, both Maggie and Clint swung toward the sound.

"Catch him, quick!" Laura hollered.

Something hit the utility room door with a thud, it flew open, and a ball of gray-blue fur came streaking across the kitchen toward the hall. The scene in the utility room was pure bedlam, with Laura and Allison scrambling around in a desperate attempt to subdue the frenzied dog. They both managed to grab hold of his collar, but even their combined strength couldn't hold him. Two steps inside the kitchen he broke free.

The blue fur ball—their neighbor's cat, Wilfred—took down the central hallway, headed straight as an arrow for Maggie and Clint. Directly behind him, in hot pursuit, came Tiny.

The girls were yelling, "Stop him! Stop him!" A tornado ripping through the house couldn't have created more noise and confusion.

Wilfred took dead aim at Clint and zipped between his legs into the living room.

When Tiny attempted to do the same, he hit the man at full speed and tried to plow his way through the obstacle of iron-muscled thighs.

"What the hell!" Clint shouted as he toppled forward onto Tiny's back.

Man and dog went down together, but before Clint could recover, Tiny was scrambling out from under him to resume the chase. The girls came running into the hall and stopped dead at the sight of Clint sprawled facedown on the floor.

Maggie's astonished stare went from the downed man to the horror-stricken

girls, and back. Then, as though in slow motion, she sagged against the wall and gave in to a fit of helpless laughter. At about the same time, the animals left the house via the open back door. Suddenly the quiet was deafening.

"Daddy! Daddy, are you all right?"

Allison's frightened voice brought Maggie back to her senses, and she reached Clint's side just as the girls helped him into a sitting position.

One look at the blood streaming down his face and Maggie sobered. "Laura, go wet some towels in cold water and bring them here," she ordered. "Quickly!"

Maggie conducted a quick search for other injuries, sighing with relief when none were found.

When Laura returned, Maggie pressed a wet cloth to Clint's forehead to staunch the flow of blood.

"I'm terribly sorry about this, Clint. Tiny is usually very well behaved. It's just that he goes berserk whenever he sees our neighbor's cat."

"Dog? Dog? You call that animal a dog?" Clint snatched the cloth from her, pressing it to the wound himself. He glowered at her darkly. "That's not a dog, lady, that's a small horse!" Waving away their attempts to help, he struggled to his feet.

"Daddy, shouldn't you go to the hospital and have someone look at that cut?" Allison interjected.

"She's right," Maggie agreed. "I'm sure it needs some stitches. Come on. I'll drive you."

"No, thanks. I'm perfectly capable of driving."

"Oh, but—"

"Mrs. Trent! It isn't safe for me to be in the same room with you, much less in a car. Every time I'm around you, disaster strikes."

Maggie stared at him. Then, slowly, her brows rose and she spread her hands wide, palms up.

"Can I help it if you're accident prone?"

*

THE DOOR WAS slammed so hard it rattled the glass. Head held high, Maggie stared at it with a ghost of a smile.

"What was my dad doing here, anyway?" Allison asked forlornly.

"He came by to bring your allergy medicine. I was about to have lunch, so I invited him to stay." Maggie sighed. "Okay, girls, why don't you go get the broom and dustpan and clean up this mess while I see what I can do in here," she instructed, stepping into the living room.

"Do you believe this?" Laura moaned as soon as they were out of her mother's hearing. "After that, we'll be lucky if they ever speak to each other again! We've got about as much chance of getting them married now as we have of spitting on the moon. I mean, we bombed out."

"I thought so at first, too," Allison said excitedly. "But I was wrong. Things are going to work out just fine."

Laura stared at her friend. "Are you nuts? How can you say that after that... Keystone Cops routine we just went through?"

"Because Dad brought over my medicine. I only get allergies in the spring, and this is the end of September," Allison explained. "Dad just used that as an excuse to come over, which means he's definitely interested. All we have to do now is see that he stays interested."

AN HOUR LATER, when he stalked into his study, Clint's face was set in grim lines. Tossing the packet of pain pills the doctor had given him onto his desk, he went to the liquor cabinet and poured out a stiff measure of whiskey.

"You really made an ass of yourself this time, Rafferty," he muttered angrily. *Why in hell had he gone over there in the first place?* Maggie Trent was not the type of woman to fit into the life he

had made for himself. That had been obvious last night.

As she had sat beside Bunny on the sofa the comparison had been almost cruel. Maggie's delicate, wholesome beauty and vibrant personality had made the younger girl seem tawdry, dull, and incredibly stupid. But Maggie Trent was not the kind for a casual affair or a one-night stand. She was the kind you took home to meet your folks, the kind you built dreams around, planned a future with.

Clint's somber gaze went to the gold-framed picture on the corner of the desk. Then he touched the woman's smiling face and sighed. He had done all that once. For ten years he and Elaine had loved and fought and supported one another through good times and bad, sharing a life that had given him utter happiness. But with her death that life had ended. He didn't believe it was possible to find that kind of perfect love more than once. And he'd had his.

To MAGGIE'S relief the rest of the weekend passed without incident. By the time she arrived at the station on Monday morning she had all but put Saturday's fiasco out of her mind.

As they had arranged, Selene Bentley came by at noon to pick up Maggie and Alex for their luncheon with Henry Burk and his mystery partner. Selene, a tall, stylish woman in her mid-fifties, was the executive who handled the Sporting Chance account for Milford and Stone Advertising Agency. It had been on her recommendation that Maggie was hired at KRHX-TV ten years ago. Selene was mentor, friend, and honorary aunt all rolled into one.

Though she knew the identity of Henry's new partner, Selene steadfastly refused to reveal it. "You'll find out soon enough," she replied, threading her sleek Cadillac through the snarl of Houston's midday traffic. "Besides, I think Henry wants to surprise you. Even though he's

been retired a few years, the man is a legend in the sports world. Henry is tickled over the partnership."

"If I recognize him it *will* be a surprise," was Maggie's disgruntled reply. Life with Larry had given her an aversion to professional sports, and for the last ten years she had avoided them like the plague.

Maggie fingered the ruffle at her wrist. The rose-and-pink silk dress had long full sleeves and a softly draped collar that drew attention to the graceful arch of her neck. It was easily the most feminine dress she owned.

Henry and his partner were already seated when they arrived at the restaurant. Sandwiched in line between Selene and Alex, Maggie didn't get a clear view of either of them.

"Selene! Maggie! It's good to see you," Henry greeted genially as he and his companion rose. "You too, of course, Alex," he added with a laugh.

"I...uh...it's nice to see you too, Henry," Maggie managed to stammer, but her eyes were glued to the tall, dark man at his side.

"Hello, Maggie." Clinton Rafferty's smile was sly. Maggie stared at him in complete shock, unable to utter a sound.

When Henry released her hand, Clint took it between both of his and held her gaze with a warm, intimate look. "It's nice to see you again," he murmured.

"Hello, Mr. Rafferty," Maggie said in a cool, distant voice, pulling her hand free. Slowly, she let her eyes settle on the bandage above his left eye, and she smiled. "How's the head?"

"Three stitches and a little soreness," he answered. "I think I'll live."

Damn the man! He had known all along! And he hadn't said a word! Oh God, why did *he* have to be Henry's new partner?

"Maggie, you sly devil. You didn't tell me you knew Clint Rafferty," Alex chided.

"Maggie and I met only recently," Clint explained.

"Wait a minute! Rafferty. Are you Allison's father?" he asked.

"I see my daughter's fame has preceded me," Clint said, laughing.

It wasn't until everyone was seated that Maggie realized she had somehow been maneuvered between Henry and Clint. Slowly it began to sink in that she was the only one at the table who hadn't the foggiest idea exactly *who* Clint Rafferty was, but from the way Alex was almost fawning over him, she could only assume he was a celebrity among sports fans.

At that moment, to Maggie's great relief, a waiter appeared. While the others made small talk, Maggie studied her menu with intense concentration. Even so, she was vitally aware of the man at her side.

"Well, now, since we all know why we're here, I suggest we get right to it," Henry said when the waiter retreated. He fixed Maggie a direct stare that held a wealth of apology. "My dear, you know I'm pleased with the job you people at Channel 6 have done. I think 'Houston Today' is a high-quality program, but... Clint here has a few objections to sponsoring the show, and after listening to his reasons, I've got to admit they make sense."

Turning her head, Maggie met Clint's steady green gaze. "And just what are your reasons, Mr. Rafferty?" Besides wanting to get even, she added silently.

"First of all, the show is on too early in the day to reach the majority of our customers. Secondly, I think the tone of the show is too highbrow to attract the audience we're aiming for. Last week you had as guests an economist, a psychologist, a concert pianist, and a Shakespearean actor. None of those people or their topics would appeal to a sportsman."

"Really?" Maggie questioned archly. "Are you saying that your customers are

a bunch of morons without an ounce of culture?"

"Maggie! For Pete's sake!" Alex admonished.

Both Maggie and Clint ignored him. "No, I'm not," he responded quietly. "What I am saying is that I think we would benefit more from sponsoring a local sporting event, or an outdoorsman's show."

"And you, Henry? Do you agree with him?" Maggie demanded.

"Well, now, he does have a point." Henry pursed his lips.

"But you should aim for a broader audience than just the macho male, mighty hunter, or dedicated jock," she argued, flicking Clint a dismissive look. "Henry, your customers come from all walks of life. Our program is designed to appeal to that broad spectrum."

Henry looked at his partner. "Well, Clint?"

"Even if Maggie's right, there's still the problem of the schedule." His gaze turned directly on her.

The arrival of their food prevented Maggie from replying, and at Henry's suggestion the rest of the discussion was postponed until after they had eaten.

As she applied herself to the meal, Maggie was thoughtful. She had avoided the question of the show's time slot because it was a valid point. For years she had been arguing with her boss, J. D. Grosserman, that the show was being aired too early, but all her protests had been firmly dismissed. She wondered if the possibility of losing a major sponsor would be enough to change J.D.'s mind.

"What I'd like to propose, gentlemen," she announced over coffee, "is that I have the show moved to the five-thirty time slot." The bold suggestion brought a gasp from Alex and a sharp look from Selene, but Maggie pressed on. "I think there are definite advantages to being the lead-in to the six o'clock news. Your adult audience should expand. Af-

ter the show has occupied that time slot for, say, a month to six weeks, I'll get our PR department to conduct a telephone survey. In it we'll ask, 'Is the man of the house watching? If so, does he shop at Sporting Chance? And what is his occupation?'"

"That sounds fair to me," Henry said. "Clint?"

"All right," he said. "We'll try it Maggie's way for now. But no contract will be signed until after the survey, and then only if it comes up to expectations."

Dazed by the success of her reckless proposal, Maggie felt as though she were walking on air as they left the restaurant. She didn't even object when Clint cupped her elbow as they started across the parking lot. It wasn't until they were almost to Selene's silvery gray Cadillac that her euphoric bubble was burst by his whispered words.

"I hope you enjoy your reprieve, little Maggie," he taunted. "Because believe me, it won't last."

"ARROGANT jock!"

Maggie's shoe hit the wall with a resounding thump. Another kick sent the other one sailing after it.

"Big, dumb, gristle-headed . . . dolt!" She slammed her purse down, then turned and began to pace the room, at last able to give vent to the anger she had held in check since the moment she encountered Clint's mocking face.

Unwittingly, during the ride back to the station, Alex had fanned her annoyance even higher with his nonstop praise of the man's prowess on the gridiron: the crowning blow, as far as Maggie was concerned.

But once she had calmed down and put her shoes back on, Maggie marched into J. D. Grosserman's office to present her case.

Maggie liked J.D. and, on the whole, considered him a good boss, but he hated change and resisted it stubbornly. Even

to suggest a change in the program schedule was heresy.

"Dammit, Maggie! We've been through this a dozen times," he exploded. "The show is doing well right where it is. And you know we've always had sitcom reruns in the five-to-six slot."

"I also know if we don't make this change you can kiss the Sporting Chance advertising money goodbye."

"Henry Burk wouldn't do that," J.D. scoffed, chewing contentedly on his stub of a cigar.

"Maybe not, but his new partner, Clinton Rafferty, would."

Maggie's softly spoken words wiped the self-satisfied look from his face. J.D. gave her a beetling frown over the top of his glasses. "The Clinton Rafferty who used to play for the San Antonio Drovers?"

"That's right. And he's adamant about the time change."

The cigar bobbed up and down as his teeth worried at it. He picked up a pencil and tapped it nervously against his desk pad, then cursed under his breath and flung it aside.

Sensing that his resolve was weakening, Maggie pressed her advantage. "Come on, J.D., it's not that big a deal."

The look he gave her was one of grim reluctance, but then he released a gusting sigh and growled, "Oh, all right! We'll give it a try. But I'm warning you, if this little plan doesn't work, I'm holding you personally responsible."

SLEEP WAS A fitful affair that night, punctuated by disturbing dreams in which Larry's face kept merging into Clint's and Clint's into Larry's.

When her alarm went off at five the next morning Maggie whacked it into silence, hauled herself out of bed and pulled on a shapeless gray flannel sweat-suit and a pair of thick-soled running shoes.

The sky had just begun to lighten when she reached the park, two blocks away.

Setting her mouth in a grim line, she pumped her knees up and down to warm up her muscles, then took off at a determined jog.

The leaves had just begun to change color, and the October morning held a damp chill which hadn't been present a week ago.

Head down, Maggie was watching the rhythmic slap of her feet against the ground when suddenly they were joined by another, larger pair. In her peripheral vision all she saw was a large, extremely fit masculine body, bare except for brief red athletic shorts.

Maggie kept her head down and continued to jog.

For five minutes she alternately slowed down and speeded up, but the size twelve shoes stayed with her. Finally, in no mood to put up with an early morning masher, she snarled, "Get away from me!"

"Charming. Has anyone ever told you, little Maggie, that your manners are appalling?"

Clint's deep baritone brought Maggie's head up sharply. "What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"Now is that any way to talk? After I've searched all over this park trying to find you?"

"Trying to find me? How did you know I'd be here?"

"Oh, Allison mentioned that you jog here every morning, and since I run a couple of miles every day, too, I didn't see why we shouldn't keep each other company."

Maggie could think of any number of reasons.

What was he doing, tracking her down at the crack of dawn like this? They had made another complete circle of the park before he spoke again.

"You know, Maggie, I applaud your efforts at physical fitness, but I don't think it's safe for you to be jogging alone at this time of the morning. There are

some real weirdos in this world. Anything could happen."

"Oh, but I'm not alone," Maggie assured him. "Just watch this." Without breaking stride, she stuck two fingers in her mouth and emitted a piercing whistle.

"Awwwww, jeeeeez," Clint groaned as Tiny bounded out of the small woods in the middle of the park. Maggie had run a half dozen steps before she realized that Clint was no longer with her.

At the first sight of Tiny, he had snagged a low-hanging tree branch and hoisted himself out of reach. He now sat astraddle the branch, looking down at the gamboling, barking dog with a gimlet eye.

Jogging in place, Maggie grinned up at him. "Why, Mr. Rafferty. Don't tell me you're afraid of Tiny? He's an absolute lamb, I assure you."

Clint shot the "lamb" a baleful look. "You'll pardon me if I doubt that, won't you," he drawled, fingering the three neat stitches above his left brow.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, come on down and let me introduce you," she ordered. "That way Tiny will know you're a friend."

Frowning, Clint cautiously did as she instructed. When he reached the ground she took his hand and extended it toward the dog.

Nose quivering, Tiny sniffed first the fingers, then the palm, and then proceeded to anoint the whole thing with a huge, slobbering lick.

"See. I told you he was harmless," Maggie said.

After giving the dog a pat, Clint confounded her by saying, "So, what time shall I pick you up tonight? I thought we'd have dinner at Tony's and maybe go to that new coffee house on Westheimer."

Maggie's jaw dropped. "What? Are you crazy?"

But Clint's lips had closed over hers. Ignoring her frantic struggles, he slipped

one arm around her waist, the other beneath her bottom, and lifted her high against his chest.

His lips explored hers leisurely, sipping, tasting, devouring her with a sweet restrained hunger that took her breath away. Slipping quickly past her lips, his warm tongue swept over the curving roof of her mouth, then skated over her teeth to test the inside of her cheek. Even as she told herself that she must stop him, her hands slid slowly around his neck, her fingers clutching the thick hair at his nape as her own tongue hesitantly responded to the persistent probing.

Oh, Maggie, you're such a fool. This man's no good, and you know it.

But the kiss grew deeper, more intimate, more demanding, until finally, with a small whimper, Maggie gave up all attempts at resistance and melted against him.

Leaning his back against the tree, Clint braced himself with his feet wide apart, and Maggie lay against him, her legs dangling between his. Freed of the need to support her so completely, his arm left her waist and both hands cupped her bottom, pressing her provocatively against his aroused body.

Every nerve, every cell in her body seemed to have sprung into tingling life. Then Clint took her lower lip into his mouth and sucked gently until Maggie shivered, going suddenly boneless. When his hand slipped under her shirt and glided upward to press against the side of her breast she hadn't the strength or the desire to stop him. Then suddenly the clasp between her shoulder blades was released, his hand slipped between them and his fingers found her freed breasts. Caressing gently, his fingertips teased the pouting nipples with a feathery touch.

Maggie moaned softly into his mouth. A small part of her brain still urged retreat, but she ignored the warning. His touch was so tender, so alluring.

All at once the ribald whistles and catcalls of two grinning youths jogging by

on the narrow path made them aware that they were in plain view in a public park.

Mortified almost to tears, her face flaming, Maggie jerked free of the ardent kiss and struggled against Clint's steely arms.

The moment her feet touched solid ground, Maggie stumbled backward and fumbled urgently to refasten the clasp on her bra. Still trembling and wondering what on earth had possessed her to let things go so far, she could only stare at him, her face taut.

Clint remained where he was. Crossing his arms over his chest, he bent one knee, propped the sole of his jogging shoe against the tree trunk, and watched her.

"Now, then, what time do you want me to pick you up tonight, little Maggie?"

She gaped at him. "I'm not going out with you. Not tonight. Not ever. Get that through your head, Rafferty!"

His slow grin was devastating. "One thing I learned playing football, little one, was not to give up. Not until that last second ticks off the clock. And you and I are just a couple of minutes into the first quarter."

"This is *not* a game, Clint! Surely you can understand why any sort of... personal involvement between us is out of the question. When it ended, not only would it put an intolerable strain on our business relationship, but Laura and Allison would be hurt."

"You sound sure it would end."

"Of course it would."

"Oh, I don't know. What if we fall madly in love and decide to get married?"

Maggie threw up her hands in disgust. "I give up! If you're not going to take me seriously, what's the use?"

"But I do, Maggie." His voice was low, his gaze burning with unspoken promise. "In fact, I'll take you any way I can get you."

"Oh!" Maggie gasped. "Oh, you..." To her utter dismay she felt her body respond to the husky sensuality in his words. But it was her anger that was fed by the wolfish glint in his green eyes and the slow, knowing smile that stretched his sensual mouth.

Maggie clenched her jaw and looked around wildly for Tiny. Spying him, she emitted a shrill whistle, then spun on her heel and took off across the park toward home, praying that her shaking legs would hold her.

Damn the man! What made him think he could just barge into her life and turn it upside down?

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MAGGIE GROANED when she approached the park entrance the next morning. She couldn't believe it! He was there again!

To her disgust, Tiny raced ahead to greet him, licking his hand slavishly. "Miserable, disloyal creature," Maggie grumbled.

As she drew near, Clint straightened and grinned. "Morning, little one," he greeted her. "All set to do a few miles?"

"What are you doing here, Rafferty?" she demanded.

"This is a public park." He raised both brows. "You know, you remind me a lot of my mother," Clint said. "Oh, not in looks or size. But she was a feisty, independent woman in her younger days. Hell, she still is, for that matter." He added, "My dad died when I was seven and my brothers were five and three. She raised us alone. She's a remarkable lady. You'll like her. And I guarantee she'll like you."

I'm not listening to this, Maggie told herself.

MAGGIE lounged back in her chair, stocking feet propped on an open desk drawer. Occasionally she darted a glance at the TV monitor on her desk to check the show's progress, but her attention

always returned to the official bio she was studying: the intriguing but highly improbable background on Nick Lawson, the young actor who was being promoted by his studio as the next Robert Redford.

Despite all the Hollywood hype, Maggie had to admit that the young man had that elusive something it took to attain stardom. And she knew that he was thoroughly likable.

A little over two years before, Nick had appeared on the show, and his unassuming manner had made him an instant hit with the entire crew.

Tossing the folder onto her desk, Maggie relaxed with a sigh. Then, smiling, she penciled in Nick's name on the taping schedule. She was looking forward to seeing him again.

A few minutes later, as Alex was wrapping up the show, the phone rang. "Maggie Trent speaking."

"An opera star, for God's sake! How many men do you think would sit still for that?"

"In this city? Oh, I'd say several thousand," Maggie replied calmly. "At least, that's what the PR man for the Houston Grand Opera tells me. Anyway, Ms. Kantrell had been booked on the show for over a month, and we simply could not cancel at the last minute. We did balance her appearance with that physical fitness expert."

"Which was the only thing that made today's show bearable," he muttered. "When will you be finished with that survey?"

"The figures are being compiled now. We should have the results by next Monday."

ALL WEEKEND she worried over the outcome of the survey. And to make matters worse, Clint seemed to be intensifying his efforts. During their early morning runs on Saturday and Sunday he was charming and amusing, making it harder than ever to refuse when he asked

her out, as he did daily. By the end of the weekend Maggie reluctantly faced the fact that the man was slowly wearing down her resistance.

On Monday morning she arrived at the station for her meeting with Henry and Clint in a state of high tension, only to find that the survey results were inconclusive.

"I think we should give it another month. Let the viewers adjust to the new time," Henry declared, his smile bouncing back and forth between J.D. and Maggie.

Not daring to breathe, she looked quickly at Clint, who was watching her thoughtfully over steamed fingers.

Maggie tensed, sure he was going to object, but finally he shrugged and muttered grudgingly, "Okay. You've got one more month. But I'm warning you, Maggie, the next survey had better be more impressive than this one or else—" he paused, eyes sparkling slyly "—I'm afraid you'll have to develop a taste for a certain black bird."

Determined not to be the one to eat crow, Maggie worked flat out over the next few weeks, stretching both herself and the show's budget to the outer limits. She even managed to pressure J.D. into letting her produce a thirty-second promo for the show, which was aired daily at regular intervals. If "Houston Today" failed to grab the lion's share of the sports-oriented viewers, Maggie was determined it wouldn't be from lack of trying.

"Now, I ASK YOU, did you ever see two sexier hunks?" breathed one of the women hovering in the shadows surrounding the set, her eyes fixed on Alex and his guest.

Standing a few feet away, Maggie fought back a grin as she listened to the breathless conversation. Slowly, she let her eyes scan the studio. It was amazing how much of the female staff at

Channel 6 had suddenly found a reason to visit the set.

Not that Maggie could blame them. Nick Lawson was one of the most attractive young men she'd ever seen, and seated next to Alex, the two of them were a study in masculine appeal. Both blond and handsome, Alex was the smooth, polished sophisticate, while Nick, casual and devil-may-care, was the rugged individualist. No wonder all the feminine hearts in the building were atwitter!

Maggie watched as Alex deftly brought the show to a close. A moment later, she stepped forward.

"That was great. Thank you, Nick, for coming," she said, extending her hand.

The actor took her hand and held it between both of his, eyes crinkling as he smiled down at her. "I was glad to. Particularly since it gave me an excuse to see you again."

Maggie laughed and disengaged her hand. "Well, whatever the reason, we're grateful. And good luck on your picture. I hope it's a smash." She smiled a quick farewell then turned away. She was almost to her office before Nick caught up with her.

"Maggie, could I see you for a moment?"

"Yes, of course," she said.

Now that he had her attention Nick seemed strangely hesitant, a rueful smile twisting one corner of his mouth. "Well, the thing is... I was wondering if you'd have dinner with me tonight?" he asked finally.

Surprise widened Maggie's eyes. She hadn't been expecting that. Nick Lawson was twenty-eight, five years her junior. It had never occurred to her that he might want to see her socially.

Sensing her hesitation, Nick urged quickly, "Please say yes, Maggie. I'd like to get to know you better."

Feeling immensely flattered and not a little embarrassed, Maggie bit her lip in confusion. She liked Nick very much, but she was too old for him. Or he was too

young for her. But even as she opened her mouth to tell him no, a picture of Clint and his young, nubile girlfriend flashed through her mind, and she thought—why not?

THE STRANGE defiant mood that prompted Maggie to accept Nick's invitation stayed with her for the rest of the day. At eight that night, wearing the sexiest little black dress she owned, she sailed out the front door on his arm.

"Do you think they'll recover?" Nick asked as they reached his plush Mercedes.

"Maybe in about a week," Maggie whispered, glancing over her shoulder at the gaping teenagers in the doorway.

Because of a school holiday the next day Allison was spending the night with Laura. Both girls had hovered over her as she dressed, trying to find out who her date was. Maggie hadn't told them. She thought it would be much more fun to surprise them, since they were both Nick Lawson fans. It had not only been fun... it had been hilarious. All through the introduction both had simply gaped, mute as two fence posts.

Maggie and Nick enjoyed a pleasant meal at a small but exclusive restaurant and afterward danced and talked for hours. He was a charming, interesting, very attentive escort, and for a while Maggie was able to put Clint out of her mind. Almost.

It was close to 1:00 a.m. when Nick walked Maggie to her front door. She was feeling relaxed and happy, and when he drew her into his arms she didn't resist.

His kiss was pleasant and warm, and Maggie returned it willingly. It was nice, Maggie decided, to be kissed, to be desired by this young man. Nice—but not earthshaking. And certainly not threatening.

"It's about time you got home. Where the hell have you been?"

The deep, angry voice cracked over them like a whip. Startled, Maggie tore

herself out of Nick's arms and whirled around.

"Clint! What are you doing here?"

He was a menacing figure, legs braced apart, hands on his hips, glaring at the younger man as though he'd like nothing better than to punch him. "I'm here because our daughters called me," he barked. "They heard a noise and were scared. I promised to stay until you came home."

She turned and gave Nick an apologetic look. "Nick, this is Allison's father, Clinton Rafferty." Her frosty gaze darted back. "Clint, meet Nick Lawson."

The two men eyed one another warily, exchanging nods. The air on the porch fairly bristled with male aggression.

"Look, Nick, I'm sorry our evening had to end this way," Maggie said. "But I had a lovely time. Really."

"That's all right, Maggie. No harm done." Bending over, he brushed a kiss across her lips, then smiled. "I'll call you," he whispered, and with a curt nod at Clint, he turned and walked away.

When his car had disappeared, Maggie gave Clint a murderous glare, then stalked into the house. She was stepping out of her shoes when he slammed the door with a resounding bang.

Maggie took exception, but before she could say a word he advanced on her and thundered, "Just what in hell do you think you're doing, going out with that young stud?"

"What?" Maggie thrust out her chin and planted her fists on her hips. "Now see here. My personal life comes under the heading None of your damned business!"

"When the girls have to call on me for help because you're too busy running around with a kid—"

"For your information," Maggie flared, "there is only five years' difference in our ages!"

"Five!" Clint looked up at the ceiling. "Good grief, Maggie. I never thought you'd stoop to cradle robbing."

"Cra—!" Maggie made a strangled sound in the back of her throat. "I don't believe this! I'm being lectured on this subject by you? Talk about the pot calling the kettle black!"

"Dammit, he's too young for you!" Clint roared. "And would you mind explaining why, after weeks of knocking myself out, I've gotten exactly nowhere with you, yet the minute that Hollywood rooster struts into town you go out with him?"

She turned on him, not the least intimidated by his size. "No, I will not! I don't have to explain my actions to you. It's my life, and if I want to...aaugh!"

Maggie's breath left her lungs in a loud whoosh as Clint grabbed her shoulders and hauled her up against his chest. "Ah, sweet heaven, Maggie, you're driving me crazy!" Clint tilted her head back and bent to find her mouth with his.

It wasn't fair! It simply wasn't fair, Maggie railed silently as she felt her body's immediate response. Her mind might resist him, but her body had other ideas, ideas that had nothing to do with intelligent choices. She was flooded with sensations, aching with need. It wasn't fair, she repeated feebly, as she melted against him and opened her mouth to his demanding kiss.

His lips were warm, his tongue warmer, and he tasted of coffee and whiskey and male. The kiss grew deeper, better, and Maggie felt its sensual pleasure all the way to her toes. Her hands slid up over the hard planes of his chest to curve around his neck, her fingers threading through his raven black hair.

Holding her clamped to him, his mouth still fused with hers, Clint moved to the couch and in a single fluid motion stretched out on his back with Maggie draped on top of him. A soft moan of pleasure escaped Maggie as her soft form pressed against his aroused body.

Clint released her from his embrace, and his large hands roamed over her back, her hips, the backs of her thighs. His body shifted restlessly beneath her slight weight.

Their new position gave Maggie a heady feeling of power, and her mouth played with his, nipping and tasting, sucking gently. She held his head between her hands and very slowly, with a teasing, feathery touch, explored the swirls of his ears and the sides of his neck until he shuddered beneath her.

When Clint tried to deepen the kiss once again, Maggie pulled her mouth from his to string a line of stinging little love bites across his face.

"Oh, God, Maggie! Yes . . . yes." His hands clutched her bottom, the long fingers gripping fiercely as he pressed her into even greater intimacy.

Maggie moaned, then gasped as he kissed her breast through the silky material of her dress. Clint's mouth caressed her until Maggie thought she would faint.

"Sweet . . . so sweet," Clint groaned. "Oh, Maggie. You're so tiny . . . but you're all woman. Too much woman for that young boy. I can satisfy you so much better than he ever could, darling."

As he spoke he shifted to roll Maggie beneath him but before her back had touched the sofa his words penetrated her brain like icy shards.

Self-disgust and anger flooded through her and she jerked out of Clint's embrace, rolled to the floor, then shot up and began to back away, her face mirroring her anguish.

It took Clint a moment to react. He looked at her blankly, then lifted up on his elbows. "What's wrong?"

"Everything," Maggie blurted. "You. Me. This whole thing. It was all a mistake."

Clint sprang up off the sofa and started for her, smiling gently. "It wasn't a mistake, love. We're attracted to each other, Maggie. This has been inevitable since we first met." Maggie's face tightened, but

Clint went on. "We're going to be good together, Maggie. Come here. Let me show you."

He reached for her, but Maggie slapped his hand away. "I said no," she snapped. "You've got a lot of nerve, calling Nick a stud, when you have a whole string of young, sexy females at your beck and call. Well, if you think I have any intention of becoming the old gray mare in your stable of young fillies, you've got mush for brains."

Clint halted, his face growing hard. "That was a cheap shot, Maggie."

"Maybe so. But I think I got my point across."

"Oh, yes. You certainly did that."

Refusing to be swayed by the hurt look in his eyes, Maggie said, "I think you'd better leave now."

Clint stalked out of the living room. At the door he turned. "You may rest assured, Mrs. Trent, that I won't bother you again."

Maggie winced as the door slammed behind him. Slowly, dejectedly, she sat down, swallowing hard against the painful tightness in her throat. She told herself it was for the best. "After all, it's not as though I'm in love with the man," she murmured shakily.

UPSTAIRS, two silent figures, huddled on the landing, looked down into the empty foyer and shook their heads sadly.

"So what do we do now?" said Laura.

"I don't know yet. It'd serve them right if we just gave up on them." Allison sighed. "But we won't."

*

AGITATED and unhappy, and not quite sure why, Maggie spent the next two hours pacing the floor. She was so exhausted by the time she finally did crawl into bed that she forgot to set the alarm and overslept the next morning. For the first time in years she was forced to skip her morning jog.

When Maggie rushed into her office twenty minutes later, her phone was ringing.

"Maggie Trent," she panted into the mouthpiece.

"Where the hell were you this morning?"

Maggie sat down abruptly. "What?"

"Where were you?" Clint repeated forcefully. "I waited around in that damned park for over an hour. Then I got worried and called the girls but they said you had already left for work. What did you do, jog somewhere else? Well hear this, little Maggie, we may never be lovers but I'm not about to abandon you to the park perverts. If I have to, I'll wait for you on your doorstep every morning. In fact, that's not a bad idea."

"Will you please let me get a word in," Maggie snapped. "I didn't jog elsewhere. I simply didn't jog. I overslept and didn't have time."

"Why? Are you ill?"

His quick switch from anger to concern threw Maggie for a moment. Drat the man! She didn't want his tenderness! "No, I'm not ill. I just forgot to set the alarm."

After a moment Clint said, "I see. Well, in that case, I'll see you in the morning."

And she did. Every morning after that he was waiting for her at the end of the drive. Side by side, while Tiny cavorted around them, they covered the few short blocks to the park, ran the usual number of laps, then returned to Maggie's home, with hardly a word spoken between them. When they did talk their conversations were stiff and formal, consisting mostly of perfunctory hellos and goodbyes, with a few comments on the weather or something equally innocuous thrown in. Beneath the surface an undercurrent of anger and wariness ran between them.

During this period Maggie redoubled her efforts to ensure that the next survey would be in their favor. Trying to sign

interesting guests, she spent hours on the phone and made numerous short trips out of town, often getting home late. Luckily for her conscience, Laura was equally busy.

The school band had been picked to play in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, and for the last year the kids had washed cars, mowed lawns, and done a variety of odd jobs to raise money for the trip.

Laura and Allison could hardly wait. The entire band was going up a day early, but after the parade the girls were to spend the remainder of the holiday weekend with Maggie's brother, Dennis, and his family in Connecticut, then fly home Sunday night.

The night before they were to leave, Maggie was packing Laura's suitcase when her daughter trailed dejectedly into the room and plopped down on the bed, sighing. Maggie raised a quizzical brow.

"What's the long face for?"

"I just talked to Allison. She's not going to New York," Laura quavered. "Her dad is sick, and she won't leave him alone with no one to look after him."

Maggie's heart gave a queer little lurch. "Sick? What's wrong with him?"

"He's got the three-day measles."

Maggie stared. "Clint has the measles?"

"Yeah, and Allison says he's mad as a hornet."

Maggie couldn't help it. She clamped a hand over her mouth, but the giggle came out, anyway. "Oh, that's priceless," she burbled. "Clinton Rafferty, super jock and...la-ladies' man, felled by the measles!"

"Moth-errr!" Laura admonished with a scowl. "You have the most warped sense of humor sometimes. It isn't funny. Allison says he feels terrible and he's running a high fever."

Guiltily squelching her laughter, Maggie tried her best to look apologetic. "I'm sorry, darling. You're right. I shouldn't have laughed. But, dear, a fever is com-

mon with the three-day measles, and if Mr. Rafferty will just stay in bed and take it easy he should be just fine."

"Try telling that to Allison," Laura muttered glumly. "She says her father is helpless when he's sick."

"Most men are," Maggie said with a chuckle.

"Of course, if she could get someone else to stay with him—" Laura gave her mother a sidelong look—"someone she really trusts...she'd probably go."

It took a moment for Laura's meaning to sink in. When it did, Maggie's eyes grew round, and she shook her head. "No. Oh, no. Not me."

"Oh *please*, Mom. *Please*," Laura wailed. "I'll just *die* if Allison doesn't get to go with me." She grabbed her mother's hands, brown eyes beseeching. "Please, Mom. Say you'll do it. Unless there's a problem at the station you've got the rest of the week off. And all you'll have to do is prepare his meals and see that he gets his rest. It won't be any trouble for you."

Oh, Laura, Maggie groaned silently, you don't know what you're saying. Sick or well, Clinton Rafferty spells trouble in capital letters. But Maggie wasn't ogre enough to deny the girls this trip, even if it meant spending five days under the same roof with Clint.

Feeling like the prize sucker of all time, she sighed. "Oh, all right. I'll do it."

She was still calling herself names the next morning when, after seeing the girls off at the airport, she let herself into the Rafferty home with Allison's key.

The house was as quiet as a tomb. Clint must still be asleep, Maggie decided. She tiptoed across the hall and placed her small weekend bag beside the stairs. Sitting on the bottom step, she unzipped her high-heeled boots and tugged them off, adjusting the legs of her jeans down over her socks. She wriggled her liberated toes. Heaven!

For a moment Maggie considered going upstairs to check on Clint, then de-

cided against it and padded soundlessly toward the door at the end of the hall, which she assumed led to the kitchen. She pushed through the swinging door, halting at the sight of the man who seemed to be attempting to crawl into the refrigerator.

"What are you doing up?" she demanded.

Clint jumped, and the back of his head collided with the metal rack above it. A muffled, but extremely colorful stream of oaths poured forth before he swung to face her, rubbing the back of his head and glowering.

His navy blue terrycloth robe was barely decent, ending at mid-thigh, and Maggie suspected he was quite naked beneath it. His face was puffy and blotched with red bumps, which spread down over his neck and chest and disappeared beneath the forest of dark hairs at the opening of his carelessly tied robe. Even his hard-muscled, hairy legs were mottled a rosy color, all the way down to his bare feet. Maggie's mouth went dry. Spotted or not, the sight of his near naked body did disturbing things to her insides.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to take care of you while the girls are gone, as arranged."

"Arranged, hell! I told Allison I didn't need anyone to nursemaid me. Especially not you. So put your shoes back on and haul that cute little tush right out of here."

Maggie's tush didn't move. *So he doesn't want me. Well, too bad.* She tilted her chin and glowered right back.

"I'll ask you one more time. What are you doing out of bed?"

"I was trying to eat breakfast, before you barged in."

For the first time Maggie noticed that there was a can of beer and a plate containing a wedge of old-looking chocolate pie on the kitchen table.

"Hey! What are you doing?" Clint yelped when she marched over to the ta-

ble and snatched up his disgusting excuse for a breakfast.

Ignoring his outraged sputtering, Maggie turned, dumping the lot into the disposal side of the sink.

"Now," she said calmly. "If you'll go back to bed like a good boy, I'll prepare a decent breakfast and bring it to you."

Clint's red-blotted skin turned even redder. "I'll go to bed all right. But only because I feel too damned bad to stand here and argue with you. However, I expect you to be out of here by the time I reach the top of the stairs. Is that clear?"

Clint's bedroom door was ajar when she climbed the stairs half an hour later. She nudged it open with her hip and stepped inside, carefully balancing a loaded tray.

"I thought you'd be gone by now," he growled, but Maggie noticed him eye the tray with interest.

Struggling into a sitting position, Clint sent her a dark look. The bunched covers slid immodestly around his narrow hips, stopping just short of indecent exposure.

The tray rattled in Maggie's hands as she tried not to notice the impossibly broad shoulders and brawny chest tapering down to a board-flat abdomen. Her heart began to pound wildly. Finally, realizing she was staring, Maggie jerked her head up.

"If you have a fever you should cover up," she snapped.

"I itch too much to cover up," he snarled. "And I thought I told you to leave."

Unperturbed, Maggie plopped the tray down on his thighs. "I promised Allison I'd take care of you, and that's what I'm going to do, so quit arguing." Grabbing the box she had placed on the tray, she turned to head for the bathroom.

"Where are you going?"

"To run your bath."

"I've already showered this morning," he informed her indignantly.

"This is not for getting clean, you idiot. This is baking soda. Dissolved in warm water, it's excellent for relieving itching. After you've soaked I'll rub you down with calamine lotion. You'll feel much better."

At the mention of a rubdown Clint brightened visibly. Without another word of protest, he picked up his fork and attacked the steaming poached eggs on his plate.

Maggie emerged from the bathroom just as he was wolfing down the last of his breakfast. "Your bath is ready. While you soak I'll change the sheets."

"Oh, all right," Clint grumbled.

He calmly flipped back the covers, stood up and started for the bathroom... naked as the day he was born.

Maggie gasped and averted her eyes. Frantically, she jerked open a dresser drawer and began to paw through it.

"What are you looking for?"

"Pajamas. Surely you have some."

"Nope. Never use 'em."

"You mean you sleep like that with a thirteen-year-old daughter in the house?" Maggie demanded.

"Certainly. Allison knows better than to barge in without knocking."

Maggie slammed the drawer shut, marched over to the bed, and began ripping off the blankets and sheets.

Pausing in the doorway, Clint watched her agitated movements and shook his head in disgust. "For Pete's sake! What are you so heated up about? You've seen a man before. You've been married."

Still presenting him with her stiff back, Maggie snapped, "Not to you, thank God!"

There was a thick pause, then, "You got that right. No man would want to be married to a little icicle like you."

Before she could reply, the door slammed shut.

Maggie whirled around and glared as though she could incinerate it with her eyes.

When Clint emerged from the bathroom, she coolly appraised him from head to toe, gave a dismissive little shrug and gestured toward the bed. "Lie down on your stomach and I'll apply this lotion to your spots."

Clint complied, stretching out in the middle of the king-size bed. Maggie clambered across the mattress on her knees and sat back on her feet beside him. She drizzled a thin line of the cool, pink liquid into the shallow trench that marked his spine.

Clint sucked in his breath. "Aa-ah! Couldn't you have warmed it in your palm first?"

"Sorry," Maggie chirped, unsympathetic.

With silken strokes she began to spread the lotion over his shoulders and down his arms, threading her fingers through the curling black hairs on his forearms, coating them with the fast-drying pink stuff. Wet fingertips slid delicately across his neck and around his ears, then became bolder as they kneaded the broad expanse of muscled flesh across his back.

Periodically, she dolloped more lotion on him and spread it ever lower, in a sensuous, circular motion. When her hands dipped below his waist she felt a tremor quake through Clint's body. Growing bolder, Maggie straddled his legs and drizzled more lotion over the base of his spine. She smeared her hands through it and gripped the firm buttocks with spread fingers, letting her wet palms slip and slide over the tight mounds of flesh. Eerotically, one lotion-coated fingertip on each hand slowly traced the underside of his buttocks where they curved into the back of his thighs.

Clint groaned and buried his face on his crossed arms.

A trembling excitement she couldn't control was building within Maggie at the delicious feel of muscle and bone and warm flesh beneath her sensitive palms. The symmetry of Clint's magnificent body, with all its powerful grace, held her

mesmerized. Her heart was pounding with a slow, heavy beat, and she could barely breathe. Her throat was dry. Every tremor that shook Clint's body produced an answering one in hers. By the time she reached his feet, she was weak with desire.

"Are you finished?" Clint's voice was a raspy whisper that made her feel hot, then cold, then hot again.

"Ye-yes," Maggie stammered, and her heart took a giant leap when Clint began, very slowly, to turn over onto his back.

His eyes burned into her like emerald fires. His face was taut and flushed with desire. There was no way he could hide his arousal . . . and no way Maggie could ignore it.

He reached out his hand, inviting her to come closer. Maggie knelt uncertainly at his feet, her mouth quivering. His voice thick with passion, eyes entreating, Clint murmured, "You've cured one itch, sweetheart, but you've created another one that only you can ease."

Temptation pulled at Maggie like an undertow. Her chest was so tight it ached. She wanted to go to him. Wanted it, at that moment, more than anything else in the world. But in the back of her mind a little voice kept whispering, "Remember Larry."

She felt herself leaning forward, felt herself reaching out to Clint, and suddenly panic overwhelmed her. She capped the bottle of lotion and slapped it into his outstretched palm.

"Here, you can do your front," she blurted, as she scrambled off the bed and made a dash for the door.

Maggie didn't slow down until she reached the dubious sanctuary of the kitchen. Standing at the sink, she closed her eyes and shook her head. Between her outrageous sense of humor and her temper she seemed to go from one disaster to another. At least . . . she had since meeting Clint.

And she knew why. She was attracted to him, not just physically but emotionally as well. More than she had been attracted to any man, even Larry in the beginning. And it was that emotional attraction that scared her witless.

Out of choice she had lived a celibate existence since her divorce. It had been a period of assessment, a time to let her wounds heal. But she was realistic enough to know that the time would come when she would want a man in her life.

The trouble was, she would want him permanently. Despite the failure of her marriage, Maggie still held the old values. She wanted a home, a husband, a family, the closeness that comes with commitment. She wanted love. She couldn't treat sex casually, and she wasn't about to squander her affections on a meaningless affair.

But the better she knew Clint, the harder it was to resist him, and she had learned a lot about him during the past weeks. For instance, when he had started making big money in pro football he had paid for his younger brothers' college educations and had built his mother a lovely home. He was generous, intelligent, and articulate. He was also gentle and caring and, when it suited him, utterly charming. In short, he was everything she had ever wanted in a man. Except faithful.

Maggie fought to suppress the weepy feeling welling up inside her. No matter what her heart told her, she couldn't let herself get involved with Clint.

For half an hour she paced the kitchen, wondering how in the world she was going to face Clint again. Finally, she squared her shoulders and started for the stairs.

She tapped softly on Clint's door and waited. When there was no answer she eased it open.

Clint was sound asleep.

CLINT SLEPT most of the afternoon and that evening listlessly ate his dinner. When Maggie checked on him before retiring she discovered his temperature had inched above one hundred and one, so she brought him aspirin and a glass of water.

A Texas "blue norther" blew in sometime during the night, sending the temperature plummeting. Maggie returned from her morning jog rosy-cheeked and on top of the world, positively bursting with energy. After she had showered and dressed, she took Clint his breakfast, then set about preparing Thanksgiving dinner. By midday the house was filled with tempting aromas: roasting turkey and cornbread dressing, baking sweet potatoes, pumpkin, mince-meat, and pecan pies. Well aware that she was cooking far more than they could possibly eat, Maggie told herself she would freeze the leftovers. It simply wasn't Thanksgiving without all the trimmings.

Clint strolled in shortly after noon wearing his skimpy robe and helped himself to a cup of coffee.

"Are you ready for lunch?" Maggie asked.

"No. I'll just wait for that feast you're preparing," he replied, settling himself at the kitchen table.

She was bustling around the kitchen like a fussy little hen. When she opened the oven door and bent to check the turkey, Clint's eyes gleamed as they caressed her rounded bottom, the stirring heat in his loins bringing a grim smile of self-derision.

It feels right having her here, he told himself as he tracked her movements around the room. And she looks so right here, flitting around in her socks and her tight little jeans and sweater.

Why was she fighting him so hard? he asked himself for the hundredth time. It wasn't all one-sided, and he knew it. Not when she responded to him the way she

did. Yet every time he got close to her she bristled like a porcupine. *Why?*

Was she jealous of the women in his past? Surely not. After all, he'd been single for five years, and he was a man. What did she expect? Although...he had to admit, the mere thought of another man touching Maggie made him feel positively murderous.

What had her ex-husband been like? he wondered. An utter fool, no doubt. He had to have been to let a woman like Maggie get away.

When she was his he would never let her go, Clint swore silently, vehemently. And she *would* be his. On that he was determined. Because the thought of going through life without her was unbearable.

Turning, Maggie caught the fierce look on Clint's face and her heart jumped in alarm. "I...uh, if you'll excuse me, I'll go upstairs and change."

"I'll go with you," Clint said. "I certainly can't come to the table in my tatty old bathrobe."

As they walked side by side up the stairs, Maggie's heart was pounding so hard she was sure he could hear it. And her awareness of him didn't lessen when she entered her room. It was right next to Clint's, and the slight sounds coming through the wall produced vivid pictures in her mind: Clint shedding his robe and striding nude across the floor, as he had done only yesterday.

Maggie snatched her logan green wool dress from its hanger and flung it over her head. With agitated movements, she applied her makeup and brushed her hair, then stepped into a pair of elegant brown suede pumps and fled the room.

The dinner was perfect and Clint was charming, which only made Maggie more nervous. She ate so much that by the end of the meal she was groaning. Even after she had loaded the dishwasher and finished cleaning up the kitchen she was still in misery.

When Maggie entered the living room she expected to find Clint watching one of the many Thanksgiving Day football games on TV. Instead he was stretched out on the sofa covered with a colorful afghan, his head propped on a pillow. A cheery fire was crackling in the fireplace, and soft, soothing music poured from the stereo speakers.

"Have a seat and join me." Clint smiled.

Warily Maggie settled herself into an overstuffed chair, kicked off her shoes, and curled her feet beneath her, eyeing Clint suspiciously.

But to Maggie's surprise, and growing unease, Clint behaved like a perfect gentleman. That is, if one didn't count the hot, blatantly sensual look in his eyes every time he glanced in her direction.

As the day wore on and afternoon turned into evening, Clint kept up a steady stream of mainly one-sided conversation. Several times he tried to draw Maggie out, asking questions about her childhood, her preferences in music, literature, and food, but his probing merely made her more on edge, and her replies came out short and curt.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity to Maggie, Clint fell silent and, with a sigh, rolled over onto his back, closed his eyes, and draped his forearm across his brow.

A twinge of concern twisted through Maggie at the sight of him. He was probably feeling very weak. Perhaps she should have insisted that he stay in bed today?

"What are you thinking, Maggie?" Clint asked quietly then.

"I was thinking that you're looking better," she improvised. "Your spots should be gone completely by morning. If your fever is gone, too, I'll get out of your way."

"You don't have to go, Maggie."

"Of course I do. The only reason I came was because you were ill and needed someone to look after you."

"Was it?"

"Yes!" she snapped, unnerved by the soft probing and the warm, intimate look in his eyes. "I would have done the same for anyone." Swallowing against the tightness in her throat, she rose. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm very tired. I think I'll go to my room."

"Maggie, don't go! It's early yet!"

Maggie ignored his frantic call, as she all but ran from the room.

STARING AT the ceiling, Maggie wondered if Clint was having trouble sleeping too. She doubted it. Shortly after she had come upstairs he had followed, and she had heard him stirring about... then nothing. A quick glance at the clock told her that had been almost two hours ago.

At first she thought she had imagined the sound. Then she heard it again; a low groan, muffled by the wall.

In a split second Maggie was up and out the door, frilly lavender nightgown billowing behind her. Not bothering to knock, she flung Clint's door open and tore across the room to the bed.

Clint lay on his back, perfectly still. Cautionously, Maggie peered down at him.

"Oh!"

Steely hands had grasped her upper arms and jerked her downward. In the next instant Maggie found herself sprawled inelegantly on top of Clint's broad, hair-covered chest.

"Oh, you—you *sneak!*" Maggie cried in outrage. "You lured me in here to—to..."

"To bring you to your senses and prove to you, once and for all, that this is where you belong—in my arms and in my bed," Clint growled with sensual menace.

Maggie sucked in her breath, so astounded that all she could do was stare at him. "Why, you arrogant, conceited oaf! Who the devil do you think you are? Let me go!" she railed.

The vitriolic tirade was pushed back into her throat as Clint rolled her over

onto her back and captured her mouth with his. His big body blanketed her, pressing her deep into the mattress. His lips were warm and insistent, tasting and devouring her with a passion that would not be denied.

A strangled sound of protest issued from Maggie's throat, and she shoved at Clint's chest, but it was like trying to lift a mountain. You've got to stop him. You can't let this happen, she told herself. But it was no use. She could no more resist him than fly, and finally, her ineffectual struggles ceased. The needs of her heart and her body were too great. She went boneless under his warm weight, her lips softening against the insistent pressure of his mouth.

Her response brought a low groan from Clint, and his tongue slid into the sweet warmth to entwine with hers. The kiss grew deeper, more intense as each tasted the very essence of the other, drinking deeply.

Easing his embrace, Clint shifted to his side, until he was only partially covering her. Stringing moist kisses and impassioned love words over her cheek, he forged a path to her ear, where his tongue traced the delicate swirls. Then he buried his face against her smooth, scented neck while his hands began a restless, intimate exploration, stroking her from breast to hip to knee, and back again.

A violent shiver rippled through Maggie, and her hands flexed against his chest, fingers burying themselves in the mat of crisp hair. The heat from his body was searing her through the thin silk gown, and dimly Maggie realized that Clint was naked. Nipping greedily at his smooth shoulders, she allowed her hand to slide around his rib cage and, with delicate savagery, dug her nails into the broad, rippling muscles of his back. An indescribable thrill shot through Maggie as she felt his quivering reaction.

"Oh, sweet heaven, love, you feel so good," Clint whispered into the hollow at the base of her neck. He placed tiny,

moist kisses along the delicate curve of her collarbone, then his tongue trailed a path of fire down into the silken valley exposed by the plunging V neckline of her gown. Nuzzling his face against her, he breathed deeply. "You smell like sunshine and flowers. A man could go crazy just holding you."

His fingers slid beneath the delicate material and nudged it aside to curve possessively around her full, warm breast, while his mouth began a slow, tantalizing climb up over the pearly mound. Moaning, Maggie arched her back, shivering violently as his tongue stroked over her swollen nipple.

Clint's hand glided downward to rest on her flat, quivering belly. Slowly, he lifted his head and gazed down at her. "Dear God, Maggie," he murmured thickly. "You're so tiny, I'm almost afraid to touch you." His eyes met hers with fiery intent. "But I won't hurt you, sweetheart. I swear it." A tremor shook his hand when it eased the gown down over her hips. "Oh, Maggie," he groaned. "I've wanted you so long. Ever since that first night."

That first night? When he'd had that Bunny creature here? Even then he had wanted to add me to his list of conquests? The very thought sent a wave of sickness through Maggie, and she stiffened in his arms. What was she *doing*, letting him seduce her like this?

With a sudden twist of her body, Maggie wrenched free of his arms and rolled from the bed. Backing away from him, fumbling to pull her gown back into place, she shook her head, eyes wide and desperate. "No! No, I won't let you do this to me! Just stay away from me, Clinton Rafferty. Just stay away," she cried as she whirled away and fled out the door.

Maggie ran down the stairs and when at last she stopped she was once more leaning over the kitchen sink, breathing hard, her heart pounding. Tears blurred

her vision, and she struggled to hold them back, but it was wasted effort.

Why? Why can't I fall for some nice, reliable man? Why does it always have to be some faithless, philandering charmer? Maggie's head came up, and her chin quivered as she struggled to get a grip on her emotions. No. No, I won't love him. I won't! she vowed.

Fists hit the kitchen door, and it flew open.

"Maggie, what the hell is going on?" Clint thundered. "If this is a game, it's not amusing."

Maggie swung around and pressed back against the sink, a hunted look in her wide blue eyes. "It's no game," she declared. "I want you to leave me alone."

"Liar!" Clint stated rudely. "I wasn't the only one breathing heavily just a minute ago. Lady, you wanted me as much as I wanted you. Don't you dare try to deny it."

"I... I'm not trying to deny it. But I will not let myself become involved with you, Clint. Do you hear me? Never again will I let myself be hurt by a man like you."

"I'd never hurt you," Clint insisted in a stunned voice. "And what the hell do you mean, 'a man like me'?"

"I mean a man who can't be satisfied with just one woman. A man who has to jump into bed with every female he sees. Oh, don't give me that shocked look!" she flared, her temper overcoming her hurt. "Don't forget, I've seen you in action with Bunny. And I've heard all about your girlfriends from Allison, so you can just knock off the wounded, innocent act!"

Clint opened his mouth to speak, but Maggie cut him off. "I was married to a man just like you for eleven years. He was a football hero, too, only injuries kept him out of the pros. He was charming and handsome and utterly faithless. I have no intention of ever finding myself in that kind of situation again."

Every trace of anger was gone from Clint's face. His gaze held only understanding and compassion. He lifted his hands and very gently framed her face, brushing his thumbs across her tear-stained cheeks. "I'm not like your ex-husband, Maggie," he assured her tenderly. "I was very much in love with my wife, and in the ten years we were married I was never once unfaithful to her. When she died, I wanted to die too, and I was positive that I could never care that much for another woman again." He smiled wryly and shrugged his shoulders. "Sooo... I only went out with young, good-time girls who could satisfy my physical needs but never touch my heart."

He saw the flicker of uncertainty and hope in Maggie's eyes and slipped his big hands farther around her head, tilting her face up until she was forced to look directly into his eyes. "But you were different, Maggie," he insisted. "I knew from the moment we met that you were going to be important to me." He sighed. "I fought against it at first, but it was no use. Since the moment you walked into my house that night there has been no other woman in my life. I swear it."

Maggie shifted restlessly. "What about Bunny?"

"I took Bunny home right after you left." His expression was open. Not even Maggie could doubt he was telling the truth.

Hope welled inside her like a bubbling spring, but she held it firmly in check. She wanted to believe him so badly it hurt... yet still the doubts persisted.

"Trust me, darling," Clint urged gently. "I won't hurt you." He tilted his head to the side and cocked one brow. "You do believe me, don't you?"

At Maggie's slow nod a wide smile spread over his face. "Good." He sighed with satisfaction. "Now, before we go any further, is there anything else bothering you? If so, let's get it out in the open right now."

"There's not just the two of us involved here. We both have daughters to think of. I have to set an example for Laura. I can't tell her to behave one way while I behave the opposite, no matter how I feel."

Clint opened his mouth as though to argue, then closed it again.

"All right," he conceded. "I see your point. But where does that leave us?"

Maggie's eyes grew soft. "Couldn't we just take some time to get to know each other? To be *sure* before we commit ourselves?"

"Okay," he said finally. "We'll play it cool for a while. But only for a while," he added.

*

THE DAYS that followed were both a joy and pure torture. It was heaven to have Clint all to herself. Their feelings for one another grew steadily as they shared both laughter and quiet, serious moments. Clint was a good listener, and Maggie found herself telling him things she had never told another living soul. She began to realize that she was happier than she had ever thought possible. Yet, at the same time, it was sheer hell. She loved Clint more every day, and she was sure he felt the same. As that love grew, so did their passion for one another, and the strain of not allowing its fulfillment was almost intolerable.

All too soon Sunday night arrived and it was time to go to the airport. They had agreed that until things were settled between them they would be discreet in front of the girls. When Laura and Allison emerged from the boarding tunnel, Maggie and Clint were standing side by side, not touching, the air between them crackling with awareness.

They greeted their daughters with hugs and kisses and, after assuring them that Clint was fine, asked about their weekend. All the way to the baggage claim area both girls babbled while Clint and

Maggie cast surreptitious glances at one another.

"I miss you already, Maggie's eyes said.
I don't want to let you go, Clint replied tenderly.

"Are you picking up the vibes I'm picking up?" Allison asked excitedly the moment she and Laura were out of Clint's and Maggie's hearing. "I don't know what happened, but those two are positively besotted with one another."

Laura squeezed her friend's arm. "I know. I know. Ooohh, I just can't believe it. Success at last!"

Just inside the front door Allison grabbed Laura's suitcase and announced, "Come on. I'll help you with your things." She hustled her up the stairs, pausing on the second-floor landing to look down knowingly at Maggie and Clint.

"If you two want to tell each other good-night or anything, don't worry about us interrupting. We'll cough real loud before we come down," she said.

Maggie and Clint turned to look at one another, their faces blank with astonishment. Then both burst out laughing.

"So much for being discreet," Maggie choked at last.

ACTUALLY, as Maggie was to discover over the next two weeks, it was a relief to have everything out in the open. She and Clint were now free to see each other whenever they wanted, which turned out to be almost every night. In addition, the girls' obvious delight over their parents' relationship eased Maggie's mind somewhat, and gradually, her optimism grew.

The one worry Maggie could not ignore was the upcoming second survey. It loomed like a dark cloud on the horizon, affecting both her professional and personal life. But as it turned out, her fears were for nothing.

"I can't believe it," she gasped, sinking down into a chair in front of J.D.'s desk. Her eyes were fixed on the tally

sheet she held. "This is even better than I'd hoped for."

"I don't know why you should be so surprised," her boss chided. "I knew you could pull it off. Why do you think I gave you the go-ahead?"

"J.D.'s right, Maggie. You did a terrific job," Alex concurred. They had made impressive gains in every category!

She barely had time to assimilate her good fortune when J.D.'s secretary ushered in Clint and the others. At Maggie's insistence she and Clint had kept their personal relationship strictly personal, and only Selene knew they were more than business acquaintances.

J.D. wasted no time in getting down to business. The moment the greetings were over and everyone had taken a seat, he handed each of the new arrivals a copy of the survey results and sat back to wait for their reactions, his expression smugly confident.

Maggie was barely aware of Selene's pleased murmur or Henry's boisterous bellow of approval. Her eyes were glued on Clint's face.

Not a hint of expression was betrayed on his rugged features as he studied the report. Maggie had almost reached the screaming point when finally he lifted his head. Slowly, deliberately, his eyes sought and held hers, and in their green depths was a warm glow of pride and approval.

"If you have those contracts handy, I'd like to sign them," he announced, his gaze still fixed on Maggie.

The actual signing was accomplished quickly, and afterward they all adjourned to a nearby restaurant for a celebration lunch.

Though Clint managed to secure the seat beside her on the banquette and spent the entire time rubbing his leg against hers and caressing her thigh under the tablecloth, to Maggie's disappointment there was no opportunity for a moment alone.

Consolingly, as she and Selene walked back to the station after lunch, Maggie

old herself that Clint was sure to call her later with plans for the evening. A private celebration dinner seemed a must.

"So, tell me, how's the romance going?" Selene queried when they had settled down in Maggie's office. "You two were certainly playing it cool all morning. That is, if you don't count all that roping under the table at lunch."

Maggie's eyes opened wide. "How did you know?"

"Darling, the gleam in Clint's eyes every time his hand disappeared from view was a dead giveaway," Selene drawled. "If it's any comfort to you, I don't think the others noticed, though why you should want to keep your relationship a secret is beyond me. The man is obviously nuts about you. What are you worried about?"

"I don't know."

"Do you still worry that there are other women in his life?" Selene probed gently.

"Yes...no...oh, I don't know!" Maggie sighed, her eyes brimming with confusion. "It's just that everything seems so perfect, so right. I keep waiting or the bubble to burst." She waved her hand in a frustrated gesture. "I guess it'll just seem too good to be true. I keep remembering—"

The phone ringing cut across Maggie's musings, and she snatched it up, unaware of the melting look that crossed her face at the sound of Clint's voice.

"Hi, babe. I miss you," he murmured.

"Me too," Maggie replied, trying not to look at Selene.

There was a short pause, then Clint huddled. "I get it. Not alone, huh?"

"Right."

"Well, I won't keep you. I just called to tell you I won't be able to see you tonight."

"Oh, Clint," Maggie wailed. "I was hoping we could celebrate tonight. Just the two of us."

"Believe me, sweetheart, I'd like nothing better, but I've got this... ah...business dinner I'd forgotten about. There's no way I can get out of it. But I'll make it up to you tomorrow night, I promise."

"Okay," Maggie agreed disconsolately. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Trouble?"

Meeting Selene's inquiring look, Maggie smiled grimly. "No. Not really. I guess I'm just feeling sorry for myself because Clint has a business dinner tonight."

"In that case, why don't you have dinner with me? We haven't gone out together in ages. It'll be fun."

Maggie opened her mouth to refuse, then thought better of it. Determined to shake off her melancholy, she smiled brightly. "Great. I'd love to."

"Super! I'll meet you at Rudi's at eight."

THOUGH SHE had approached the evening with a decided lack of enthusiasm, by eight-thirty Maggie was very glad she had accepted Selene's invitation. Freshly showered, perfumed, and dressed in an elegant midnight blue lace dress, she was sitting in the plush, dimly lit restaurant enjoying pleasant conversation and a delicious meal of scampi with an old and dear friend.

In all truth, she was enjoying herself...until her eyes strayed to the dance floor.

"...of course I'd been telling Henry all along that you—" Suddenly, Selene's words cut off as she reached across to grip Maggie's shaking hand. "My God, Maggie! What is it? You look as though you've seen a ghost!"

Drawing her tortured gaze away from the couple on the dance floor, Maggie met her friend's concerned look and shook her head dazedly. "Not a ghost," she replied in a wooden monotone, once again letting her eyes stray. "Just another two-timing snake."

Selene turned to follow the direction of Maggie's gaze. There on the dance floor, with a beautiful young woman cradled in his arms, was Clint.

"Oh, Maggie, love, I'm so sorry."

The music ended, and wide blue eyes, shimmering with pain, watched Clint and his date return to their table on the other side of the dance floor.

Holding Maggie's trembling, icy cold hands between her own, Selene leaned forward and whispered urgently, "Look, Maggie, if we move calmly and keep to the shadows we can make it to the door without being seen. Come on, honey," she urged. "Let's get out of here."

The words brought Maggie's chin up. She drew in a deep breath and sat up straighter in her chair, pride overcoming her pain. "I'm not going anywhere," she stated in a tone that rang with determination. "Especially not just because Clint Rafferty happens to be here with one of his young bimbos." Giving Selene a tight smile, she picked up her fork. "Besides, I haven't finished my dinner yet."

What Maggie wanted was to march over there and give Clint a hard poke in the eye, then go somewhere and have a good bawl...but she wouldn't. Not only because she wasn't about to let him know how much he had hurt her but because she'd be *damned* if she'd shed another tear over yet another worthless male.

With dogged determination, Maggie worked her way through the delicious meal, chewing and swallowing the gourmet food and sipping the fine wine without ever once tasting it, all the while castigating herself mercilessly. Pride and anger were the only weapons she had to keep the terrible pain at bay.

Finally every morsel was consumed. Delicately, Maggie patted her mouth with her napkin and settled back in her chair.

"May I ask the waiter for the check now?" Selene gritted out between tightly clenched teeth.

"Sure. I'm ready whenever you are."

"I was ready an hour ago." Selene shot her a harassed look and lifted her hand for the waiter.

When her friend had finished signing, Maggie picked up her evening bag, then rose, but instead of heading for the door she turned the opposite way.

"I'm going to stop by Clint's table and say hello," Maggie tossed over her shoulder.

Maggie was only a few feet from his table when he looked up and saw her. She felt a sweet surge of satisfaction as she watched his face blanch to a sickly gray.

"Maggie!"

"Hello, Clint. I certainly never expected to run into you here," she cooed. A pleasant smile curved her mouth, but her eyes impaled him like icy daggers. "Wasn't it lucky that Selene and I decided to have dinner here tonight?"

Clint jumped awkwardly to his feet, nearly toppling his chair in the process. "Maggie, this isn't what you—"

Briefly, his eyes sought help from Selene, but she merely took a step closer to Maggie and stared back at him as though he were something that had just crawled out from under a rock.

Finally, Clint gestured toward the young woman who sat watching them intently. "This is Susan Carstairs. Susan, meet Maggie Trent and Selene Bentley. Maggie is—"

"I produce the television show which Clint and his partner sponsor," Maggie cut in, giving the silent young woman a stiff smile. "Actually, that's why I stopped by your table." Her attention reverted to Clint. "That meeting we had scheduled for tomorrow is no longer necessary. I've reached a decision... and it's irreversible. We won't keep you any longer. Good night, Clint, Ms. Carstairs. Enjoy the rest of your evening."

Head high, face set, Maggie headed toward the exit, Selene right on her heels. They had barely reached the lobby when Clint caught up with them.

"Maggie! Wait! You've got to listen to me."

Frigid blue eyes lasered into him. "I don't have to do anything of the kind," she stated cuttingly, slipping into her blue fox jacket and turning for the door.

The space between them was covered in two large strides. Clint grasped her upper arm and spun her around to face him. "Maggie, love, if you'll hear me out you'll see that this is not what you obviously think."

Pointedly, Maggie looked down at the big hand sunk deep in the luxuriant fur. Her softly hissed, "Take your hands off me," hit him like a spray of fine buckshot, and he released her instantly.

"For God's sake, Maggie, don't do this to us!" he implored. "At least let me explain."

Discreetly, Selene pretended to study a painting beside the door.

For a brief instant Maggie was struck by the beseeching look on Clint's face, and her heart lurched against her rib cage, but she quickly smothered the weak reaction. She'd had eleven years of denials and pleas of innocence from Larry. She didn't want to hear any more. "This is hardly the place for explanations of that sort."

"All right. If not now, then later." He shot a quick glance at his watch. "I'll take Susan home and be at your house in half an hour." His face was hard, resolute. "And when I get there you'd better let me in, or so help me, Maggie, I'll kick the door down. We're going to get this thing settled tonight."

The thirty minutes gave Maggie time to get herself firmly under control. When she heard Clint's car pull into the drive she was waiting for him, cool and collected, her resolve firm. Maggie opened the door and motioned Clint inside, then turned on her heel and marched into the living room.

In the middle of the floor she swung to face him, her eyes cold and accusing. "You wanted to explain."

"Can't we sit down?"

"No. I don't expect this to take long. Just say what you have to and leave. I'm very tired."

Clint's mouth compressed into a tight line but his voice was soft and beseeching. "Maggie, I know you're angry and hurt," he began, "and from your point of view, I probably look guilty as hell, but you see, Susan is Henry Burk's daughter. She's separated from her husband, and she's going through a rough patch right now. Henry told me months ago that she'd be coming for a visit, and asked if I'd take her out. I said yes, then promptly forgot about it. This morning he told me that he'd taken the liberty of making reservations for us to have dinner tonight at Rudi's." Clint shrugged and spread his hands wide. "Because she's Henry's daughter, I didn't quite see how I could get out of it gracefully." He waited for her to comment, but Maggie said nothing. "Look, I'll admit I handled it badly, and for that I'm truly sorry. I never meant to upset you, darling. Surely you know that."

Maggie's expression didn't alter. Her silence was ominous.

After a few seconds Clint could stand it no longer. "For God's sake, Maggie," he burst out. "That's the truth!"

"Oh, I believe you," Maggie informed him. "But you still lied to me. I had eleven years of lies from a man, and I don't intend to put up with any more."

"But sweetheart, I didn't lie. It was a business commitment," Clint protested.

Maggie's eyes grew glacial. "What you neglected to tell me was that your 'business commitment' was a date with your partner's beautiful young daughter. A lie by omission is still a lie."

"Dammit! Did it ever occur to you that I was afraid of just this sort of reaction?" Clint exploded. "Okay, you tell me! Just what would your reaction have been had I explained the situation beforehand? Would it have been any different?"

Taken aback by the question, Maggie stared at him blankly for a second. "Probably not," she admitted.

"Exactly! So do you see why I did what I did? At least this way I had a chance of getting my obligation out of the way without upsetting you in the process."

"Oh, no you don't! Don't you dare try to pretend you were doing it to protect me," Maggie ground out furiously. "You were trying to have your cake and eat it too! If you had really been thinking of me you would have told Henry that you were no longer free to escort his daughter. The fact that you didn't only proves that it was what you really wanted to do." Smiling cynically, she said, "Who knows. If you play your cards right maybe you could even marry the girl. Then someday you'd be the sole owner of the Sporting Chance stores."

The instant she uttered the words, Maggie regretted them. Clint stared at her, his face granite hard.

"I am not in the least interested in acquiring either Henry's share of the business or his daughter," he spat out bitterly. "And if you'll recall, you were the one who insisted that we keep our relationship quiet, not me." Clint shook his head. "You say you care for me, but you don't trust me. Well, let me tell you something, lady, when you really love someone, you trust them."

She clasped her arms more tightly against her midriff and lifted her chin. "I don't recall ever telling you that I loved you," she stated haughtily, her voice quivering.

Clint looked as though she had slapped him. He stared at her for a long, tense moment, then replied quietly, "Well, I guess I misunderstood the situation." He nodded curtly and headed for the door. She barely heard his soft, "Goodbye, Maggie," just before it slammed shut.

In the deafening quiet Maggie could hear her heart pounding as a wall of tears banked against her lower lids. She looked

up at the ceiling and widened her eyes to hold them in check. "I won't cry," she vowed through quivering lips. "I won't."

MAGGIE GLARED at Selene over the width of her desk. "No, I have not heard from Clint, and no, I have not called him, and so help me, if I so much as hear that man's name again I think I'll scream!"

"Sorry," Selene drawled. "Just thought I'd ask."

With a sigh, Maggie propped her elbows on the desk top. "No, no. I'm the one who's sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at you like that. It's just that for the past two weeks either Laura or Allison, or both of them, have been at me constantly. All I hear is how miserable Clint is. How he hasn't been out with anyone else. How I ought to give him another chance...and so on."

"The girls are right. Clint is miserable. He looks like hell, and he's working himself into the ground." Selene gave Maggie a long, intense look that made her squirm. "Are you really sure you did the right thing, Maggie? Don't you think that maybe...just maybe...you may have misjudged the man?"

Maggie looked at Selene with overbright eyes, all her ambivalent feelings plain on her face. "...I just don't know, I—"

Her stammered reply was cut off as her office door was thrust open with such force it crashed against the wall. Maggie and Selene looked up in astonishment to see Clint storm in.

His blazing eyes fixed on Maggie, he strode across to her desk. "Get your coat. You're coming with me."

"What?" Maggie's eyes grew even wider, then indignation took over. "I most certainly am not."

"Just shut up and read this," Clint commanded, slapping a crumpled sheet of paper down on her desk. "And after you've read it, get your coat."

Maggie opened her mouth to argue, but a second look at his face changed her

nind. He looked ready to tear something—or someone—in two. gingerly, she picked up the paper and smoothed it out with her palm.

"Oh, no!" Maggie looked up at Clint after scanning only the first line. "Oh, my God, no!" she cried.

"Maggie, love, what is it?" Selene demanded.

Maggie neither heard nor replied. When she raised her head her face was chalk white. "But...but...this can't be true," she cried in a voice that verged on hysteria. "This says—"

"That's right," Clint rapped out. "Allison and Laura have run away."

*

DURING THE PAST few hours, as they had driven steadily northward, the scenery had changed from the flat sprawling metropolis of Houston to dense, hilly forest and finally to these gentle swells that marked the beginning of the prairie. But Maggie had seen none of it. Restlessly, her fingers twisted in her lap while her eyes searched the side of the highway ahead.

"Are you sure we've taken the right road?" she asked Clint.

"As sure as I can be. *If*, like their note says, they really are going to my mother's, then this is the way they would go. Highway 45 is the most direct route between Houston and Dallas."

A low moan escaped Maggie. "Hitchhiking! I can't believe they could be so foolish as to hitchhike!" Fear clawed at her. "Oh, Lord, Clint, anything could have happened to them. Anything!"

A hard, warm hand cupped her shoulder and massaged gently. "Don't get yourself worked up so, Maggie. We'll find them. I promise you."

She looked at Clint with anguished tear-filled eyes. The steady determination in his handsome face eased the constriction in her chest ever so slightly, and Maggie placed her hand on top of

his. "I know, Clint," she whispered unsteadily. "I know."

"We'll stop here and call again," Clint said, pointing toward the sign that read "Corsicana Next Exit."

These frequent stops to call ahead and find out if the girls had arrived at Mrs. Rafferty's were slowing them down, but neither she nor Clint could stand the suspense of not knowing. So far they had stopped four times with the same results: Clint's mother had not heard a word from Allison and Laura. Yet when Clint swung the car into the service station, Maggie felt hope rise again.

"Be right back," Clint said as he climbed out. But when she saw him slam the receiver back onto the hook and nearly tear the booth door from its hinges, she knew, and her shoulders slumped.

"Still no word," he clipped out when he slipped back behind the wheel. He cast a quick, concerned look at Maggie's strained face, then sent the car roaring back onto the road.

At the next town Clint again pulled off the freeway and sought the nearest phone. But this time when he tore out of the booth his face was lit up like a Christmas tree.

"They're there, Maggie!" Clint slid onto the seat and reached for her all in one motion. He hauled her onto his lap and hugged her tightly to his chest. "They're okay. They're safe," he murmured shakily against her hair. "They arrived at Mother's just minutes after my last call." He buried his face against the side of her neck, and Maggie could feel the tremors that rippled through his big body. She knew that they were echoed in her own.

"Oh, thank God," were the only words she managed to utter before bursting into tears.

Clint held her close and rocked her back and forth, his big hands stroking and caressing her back and shoulders as he crooned soothing words in her ear.

They were oblivious to the traffic streaming by and the curious stares of other people at the service station.

When the worst of her storm was over, Maggie would have pulled away, but Clint tightened his hold. "It's all right, sweetheart," he reassured her softly. She could feel his warm breath filtering through her hair to caress her scalp as he pressed tender kisses against her temple. Maggie shivered and rubbed her cheek against his chest.

"I've missed you so, darling," Clint whispered. "I thought I'd go crazy with missing you."

Maggie wanted to reply that she had missed him too, but the words could not get past her aching throat.

"Maggie, love," Clint began softly. "I didn't lie to you, sweetheart. I really did think of that dinner with Susan as a business commitment. I'd never be unfaithful to you, darling. You've got to believe me."

Slowly, Maggie raised her head, her shimmering, tear-drenched eyes awash with feeling as they searched his face. Suddenly, as she stared at the longing and near despair in his expression, all her doubts disappeared, and a tremulous smile curved her mouth. She lifted her hand to cup his strong jaw. "I do believe you, darling," she whispered.

Clint sucked in his breath, and a flame leaped to life in his eyes. "Oh, Lord, Maggie! You don't know what it means to me to hear you say that," and he lowered his mouth to hers.

The kiss was long and soft and infinitely sweet. Maggie felt as though her soul had suddenly taken fire. And when it was over they simply clung together in shared relief and happiness, neither saying a word for several minutes.

When at last Clint sat her away from him, he took a handkerchief and tenderly mopped her tear-streaked face. "I love you, Maggie," he whispered.

"I love you, too," she replied shakily.

Clint's eyes flared briefly, then he bent to place a swift, hard kiss on her mouth. "You and I need to have a long talk," he informed her. "But I'm afraid it will have to wait until we've dealt with our daughters."

Maggie straightened her clothing. "Yes, you're right," she agreed. "Sweet heaven, when I think of the risk they took, my blood runs cold."

Clint's face hardened. Abruptly, he flicked the ignition and put the car in gear. "Not as much as you think," he said sharply. "It seems the little dears took the bus."

"The bus? Do you mean to tell me I've been worrying myself sick and..." Maggie made a low sound deep in her throat. "Just you wait until I get my hands on those two. I'm going to wring their necks!"

"I'm afraid you'll have to wait in line," Clint growled, and pushed the gas pedal to the floor.

It was almost dark when they pulled into the driveway of Mrs. Rafferty's brick home. They quickly got out of the car and entered the house.

"Where are they?" he demanded uncivilly, before his mother could say a word.

Emma Rafferty wasn't in the least intimidated. Folding her arms under her ample bosom, she met her son's hard glare with unblinking directness. She was a big, raw-boned woman, only four or five inches under Clint's impressive height. Standing between them, Maggie felt like a Lilliputian.

"Now just hold on there," Mrs. Rafferty commanded. "Before you go off half-cocked, I think you should know that Allison and Laura only pulled this stunt in the hope of getting the two of you back together." Pointedly, she looked down at Maggie's and Clint's joined hands. "And from the looks of things, I'd say they succeeded. I'd think the two of you would be grateful, not angry." She paused long enough to shoot

Maggie a quick look. "By the way, I'm Emma Rafferty, this lout's mother."

"How do you do, Mrs. Rafferty," Maggie replied quickly. "I'm terribly sorry about all this, and for barging in on 'ou this way."

"Don't give it a thought." She subjected Maggie to a slow appraisal. "You're a little bitty thing, but from what I hear you're a good match for my son. It's high time he settled down with a decent woman."

Maggie felt a blush start at the base of her neck and spread all the way up to her hairline. But Emma Rafferty's attention had already swung back to her son.

"Now I want you to promise that you won't be too hard on these girls when I call them out here, Clint," she admonished sternly. "After all, they had your best interest at heart, and no harm came o them."

"Oh, all right," he relented sourly.

A few minutes later, each holding lightly to the other's hand, their faces stricken with guilt and apprehension, Allison and Laura edged reluctantly into the living room, Emma Rafferty right behind them.

At the first sight of her daughter, all the anger drained out of Maggie and she enfolded Laura in a tight embrace. After only the barest hesitation, Clint pulled his own daughter to him.

Finally Clint and Maggie released the girls and stepped back. Clint tried to keep a stern expression but reluctantly, his mouth curved up at the corners. He looked down at Maggie and shook his head, then hooked an arm around her waist before returning his attention to Allison and Laura. "Luckily for you two, things worked out just fine this time. But lo me a favor. The next time you decide to help us... don't."

"YOU'RE A terrible man, Clinton Rafferty," Maggie breathed huskily against the side of Clint's neck. Her lips nibbled delicately at the brown skin as though

savoring a delicious treat, while her fingers worked at his shirt button. "Scandalous, really."

"Umm hmm," he agreed.

"First you rush us out of your mother's house so quickly we barely had time to eat breakfast or say goodbye, then we no sooner get home than you get rid of the girls and drag me to the couch."

"I wanted you to myself for a while, that's all," he informed her as his hands ran boldly over her curves.

"But don't you think you were being just a bit obvious when you sent the girls off to the movies? Whatever will they think?"

"That I'm about to make love to you, probably," he answered with lazy unconcern, releasing the buttons on her blouse one by one. "And they'll be right." The red silk blouse was pushed over her shoulders and quickly disposed of as Clint eased Maggie down onto the sofa cushions. "But before we get to that I think it's time we talked about the future," he rumbled softly. "I love you, Maggie, and I want you for my wife."

Devilishly, Maggie pursed her lips as though mulling it over, and Clint's eyes narrowed.

"Say yes, you little wretch!"

"Yes, you little wretch," she parroted with a grin.

Clint groaned. "Maggie, so help me..."

His protest was cut off as Maggie brought his head down to hers. When their lips met she moaned softly as sweet waves of desire began to lap over her. Clint was hers and she was his, and nothing else mattered.

Clint felt Maggie's small hands flutter over his shoulders and drift down his back, and he moaned softly, his heart soaring. He was in heaven, he was sure of it.

Then, without warning, something wet and warm rasped over the back of his neck, breaking the sensual spell.

"What the—Tiny! You idiot animal!" Clint roared, shoving the black-muzzled face away. "And cut out that giggling, you little devil!"

Deeply hurt by his hero's sharp rejection, Tiny scurried to the hearth, lowered his big body to the rug and laid his

snout on his crossed paws. The soft, rustling sounds and murmured words of love issuing from the sofa drew his attention, and for a moment he gazed dolefully at the entwined couple, then, with a long sigh, discreetly turned his head and went to sleep.



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LUCY
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The Carristers had fallen, but Jenny Carrister was determined to carry on. Then Philip Thornhill walked into her life and filled her days with a new purpose.

Jenny Carrister dumped the envelope of typing onto the passenger seat and turned the ignition key. The old car choked into life, but she ignored the miserable noises it was making. They sounded expensive, and there was no money to spare.

She drew away from the manor house, pausing at the turn in the road to look back at her home. From this distance Carrister Hall looked like a postcard dream of an old English baronial residence, with mullioned windows and a covering of ivy. The sun of a late April afternoon caught the honey-colored stone where it showed through, and cast a glow over the dusky red roof. It was only when you got closer that you could see the missing tiles, the cracked windows and the other repairs that were becoming urgent.

The road to the village lay over ten miles of open countryside, which Jenny took gently, as the car preferred it that way. Much of this land had once belonged to the Carrister family, but now there were just the few acres that surrounded the house. The family too had gradually disappeared, leaving only two surviving Carristers, herself and her great-grandfather, Sir Leonard, the fourteenth baronet. Grandpa, as she called him, would be home tonight from a short trip to London, and the house would ring with his irascible comments about "the proper way of doing things." Since his ideas had been formed under Queen Victoria and Edward VII, keeping up with him taxed all Jenny's ingenuity. At eighty-seven he had the faculties of a man twenty years his junior, vigor enough to rule his tiny kingdom like an autocrat, and eyes like a hawk for any infringement of ladylike behavior.

There were sixty-seven years between them, plus, on her side, the awareness that they lived in two different worlds. But there was also a love that leapt nimbly over the obstacles and made her devote herself to protecting him, and keeping his illusions intact. She was looking forward to his return.

At last the village of King's Carrister came into view, on its extreme edge a cottage which was the home of Dr. Howard Whickham, an author of books that were published to respectful reviews in the serious papers. For two years Jenny had done his secretarial work two full days a week in his cottage; the rest of the time she took his typing home.

Now the car developed a lurching movement that she knew meant a slow puncture. She finally limped to a standstill outside the cottage. She would deliver the work and worry about the tire afterward.

She found the front door unlocked as it always was, and Dr. Whickham at a desk in the front room he'd turned into a study. A frail-looking man in his early sixties, he beamed at the sight of his visitor.

"I can't stop long," she said. "I've got a puncture."

"You'll stay for a sherry," he said. "That's an order."

"Well—" she dropped into a chair "—just long enough for you to check my typing."

"Your typing is always perfect," he said.

As Dr. Whickham was a historian with a passion for accuracy, this was no mean compliment. But as she watched a guilty look steal over his face, she chuckled. Jenny knew what was coming.

"Don't tell me," she accused. "You've rewritten Chapter Twelve yet *again*."

"I haven't exactly rewritten it," he defended himself. "Just one or two little ideas...."

"You've rewritten it," she said. She knew his "one or two little ideas" meant a major reshuffling of the chapter.

"I shall retype *just once more*," she told him sternly. "After that it's going off to your publisher before he shoots himself."

He laughed and filled her sherry glass. While she sipped he got his notes together, suddenly aware that the sun seemed to have come out in the room. That was always the way when Jenny came to his house. She was more of a daughter to him than his own, whom he seldom saw.

While he shuffled papers he glanced at her without seeming to. She was twenty, but her lack of sophistication often reminded him of a schoolgirl. No wonder, he thought, shut away from the world as she was. She was slender, and probably had a nice figure under the shapeless sweater and old jeans. Her huge green eyes and flawless skin hinted at beauty. Her curly brown hair glowed russet where the light caught it. If only she'd make the best of herself. But then, what incentive did she have, shut away with that old dragon?

"How is Sir Leonard?" he asked.

"Fit as a flea," she said cheerfully. "He rang me last night. Said the doctor told him he was in wonderful shape for a man his age. I don't think he needed a checkup at all."

Despite her bright words he thought he'd detected a note of anxiety in her voice.

"He's a very old man, Jenny," he said. "You've got to be prepared to lose him one day."

Her face became impish. "Grandpa says he isn't going to depart until he's found me a suitable husband—worthy of

the family name and estates. And that will never happen."

"What estates?" he demanded. "All you've got left is that tumbledown old house. As for the family name—he's a baronet, not a duke."

"If Grandpa heard that, he'd say the only title worth having was that of an English gentleman."

"But not now...that kind of thinking is outdated, Jenny," he expostulated.

"Not for Grandpa," she said serenely.

"What about you? Wouldn't you like to live in today's world? Wouldn't you like to get out of that mausoleum and have a modern flat like other girls your age? You can't enjoy living with a man in his eighties, and two servants so stiff with rheumatism that you have to do most of their work."

"I couldn't do anything that would hurt Grandpa. I couldn't just move out. I'd never have an easy moment wondering if he was being looked after properly. Anyway," she went on, "what would I do out in the world? I'm not brilliant like Ollie."

She nodded at the large photograph of Dr. Whickham's daughter Olympia on the wall. If there was one thing the dashing Ms. Whickham loathed it was being called Ollie, and on the whole Jenny only did so when there was a safe distance between them.

Olympia was favored by the gods. Her late mother's beauty and her father's brains had been combined in her. At twenty-six she was a researcher for television documentaries, which she regarded as the prelude to a career before the cameras. No one doubted this would happen. Olympia always got what she wanted.

From where Jenny was sitting, she could see not only Olympia but herself in a large mirror. The sight of her jeans and sweater gave her a pang. Olympia's face,

perfectly made up and exuding feminine allure, seemed to mock her.

It would be nice, she thought, to look as glamorous as that. But not practical if you had to drive an old banger that you serviced yourself. And right now she had that puncture to cope with.

She rammed her woolly hat on, pulling it down over her ears and tucking all curls out of sight.

"You could be such a pretty girl," said Dr. Whickham in a pained voice.

Jenny scooped up Chapter Twelve and made for the door. "I'll come back with this in a couple of days." She cast a final look at Olympia. "I'll bet Ollie doesn't know how to change a tire."

"Naturally not. My daughter would think she was losing her grip if there were fewer than three young men panting to do it for her."

Jenny chuckled. Outside, she hoisted the spare tire from the trunk and got to work. With the jack under the rear portion of the car, she began pumping. Finally, the car began to rise. She paused for breath and rubbed her aching back, as visions of the immaculate Olympia danced through her head.

Drat the girl! she thought crossly, pumping away again until the car was well clear off the ground. She loosened the screws of the wheel, pulled them off, and began to tug at it. At first it wouldn't move, then it came free so fast that she fell sprawling in the road.

She sat up, shoulders sagging, a prey to rebellious thoughts.

"Hey—little feller!"

She wasn't sure she'd heard the voice at first, but turning, she found herself confronting the radiator of a car that had crept up on her while she was preoccupied. From somewhere above her head the words were repeated.

"Little feller—"

She bounded up, scowling. "Are you talking to me?" she demanded of the young man behind the wheel.

He might have been in his early thirties, with dark wavy hair and warm brown eyes that crinkled easily. His face was pleasant as he smiled at her, unafraid of her ferocity.

"That's right. I tried tooting you but the horn of this car doesn't work. Sorry to call you like that—"

"So you should be—I'm a *girl*!" She snatched off her hat as she spoke, and the russet curls tumbled around her face.

"Look, I didn't mean any offense. I'm sorry—" He gazed at her in comic dismay. "Can I make amends—help change your tire?"

"I am quite capable of changing it myself, thank you."

He made a placating gesture. "I'm sure you're a real expert. I just thought two more hands might help, with that Rube Goldberg contraption you're driving."

"There is nothing the matter with my car! Well... at least its deficiencies are clearly visible. They don't hide under a shiny surface and appear when least expected."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I recognize the car you're driving. It's from Terris Car Hire at the station. John Terris's one and only car. It's not just the horn that doesn't work. The door handle comes off, and you should be careful how hard you put your foot down."

"Then you'll be revenged on me, won't you?" he said amiably, and drove on, leaving her standing in the middle of the road, a reluctant grin on her face.

Jenny wondered where he was going, as she finished replacing the tire, and got into the car to start for home. "He's not a local," she mused, "and there was something about his voice I can't quite place. He sounded too English to be American, and yet—if he *is* American he might be coming to the Hall to see the ceiling."

Carrister Hall boasted a ceiling by Hugh Dorner, a minor English artist of

the seventeenth century, who had achieved fame by sailing for America with the pilgrim fathers, and doing a series of vivid pen-and-ink sketches of life in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The ceiling at the Hall was the most perfect example of his early work in color. It drew regular visitors, many of them Americans.

Jenny was glad of the visitors because of the pride and pleasure Sir Leonard took in showing them around. And the donations many of them left for the upkeep of the Hall were also welcome. If only the stranger should turn out to be a tourist . . .

Jenny found him five miles out of the village, the hired car pulled over to the side, smoke pouring from the open hood. The young man was gazing in dismay at the sizzling engine, but when Jenny drew to a halt beside him he looked at his watch and grinned.

"You're late," he declared. "I expected you at least five minutes ago."

She laughed and opened the passenger door while he fetched his bags and loaded them onto the back seat. When he had seated himself, he offered his hand. "My name's Philip Thornhill. I just arrived in England yesterday from Massachusetts."

"Then you've heard of Hugh Dormer," Jenny said.

He looked baffled by this mental leap-frog. "I certainly have. There's a whole art gallery devoted to his work. But I don't see . . ."

"I'll explain later. Where can I take you?"

"Well, first I need somewhere to stay. Then I must find Carrister Hall."

Jenny gave a small yelp of joy. "You have come to see our Dormer ceiling. It's why everyone comes to call."

"Your ceiling? You mean—you live there?"

"That's right. I'm Jenny Carrister."

They were moving now, and her attention was on the road, but she noted his

start of surprise. "There are still Carristers living there?" he said.

"Of course. I live there with my great-grandfather."

"And he is—?" he said quietly.

"Sir Leonard Carrister. But how did you hear about the Dormer ceiling?" she asked.

"Er—I—someone mentioned it to me. I don't know much about it."

"It's very large and very ugly, and when you've seen it you'll understand why he took to pen and ink."

He shouted with laughter. "You're not an admirer?"

"Well, I don't like his painting, but we owe him a lot. He brings in tourists who stay with us as paying guests. They love it. The guest room has a four-poster bed. We dress for dinner, too, and make an occasion out of it."

"Have you any room for a paying guest at the moment?"

"That's what I was going to suggest, somewhere to stay. You look as though I can trust you to keep a secret." She stopped the car. "We're nearly home, so I'd better explain. Grandpa must never know that our guests pay. He's eighty-seven, and he doesn't really live in the modern world. If people came to look at the house he's always invited them to stay because in his day, that's what one did. I thought we should be charging something to cover the costs, but when I tried the idea out on him, he got terribly upset, so now I do it in secret. I hate deceiving him, but I can't afford not to. So you must promise not to tell."

He was silent for a moment, his eyes fixed on her intently. When she noticed a smile lurking in their depths, she found herself smiling back at him.

"I think you must be a marvelous girl," he said gently. "And I'd be honored to stay with you."

She felt herself blushing, and was annoyed.

"Will you excuse me a moment?" she said, jumping out of the car to run to a

telephone kiosk on the far side of the road. She dialed the Hall, and told Betterton, "It's urgent. I've got a paying guest and we'll be home in about ten minutes."

"I shall inform Mrs. Betterton, Miss."

The voice was formal, but Jenny could hear the undercurrent of excitement. For the Bettertons a guest was an "occasion," reminiscent of the Hall's great days.

"You'll have to help me," said Philip as she bounded back into the car. "Who else knows I'm paying?"

"We've got a staff of two. Betterton's the butler and his wife is cook. They were both born into service with the family and they cling to the old ways almost as much as Grandpa, but they do know the truth. I couldn't keep the scheme going if they didn't."

The road ahead lay through a small wood that marked the boundary of the Carrister estate. It was so overgrown that once they were inside, darkness seemed to descend, and Jenny switched on the headlights.

"Like trying to get through Sleeping Beauty's forest," Philip murmured.

Jenny laughed. "Well, the 'castle' certainly looks as though no one's repaired it for a hundred years. But if the Prince found the Princess wearing jeans and axle grease, he might decide to forget about the whole thing."

"He'd be kind of spineless to give up so easily, wouldn't he?"

She was glad to concentrate on the road and to avoid answering this. He had turned to smile at her, but she didn't want to look at him. She didn't know why, except that she suddenly felt self-conscious.

Then they were at the bend that brought the house suddenly into view. She heard his sharp intake of breath, and he said, "Could you stop here?"

She pulled over and he went to stand in the precise spot she always chose herself. He stood a long time in silence, unaware

of her when she came to stand beside him.

"That's perfect," he said. "It's exactly—as you'd expect it to be."

She had the odd feeling that he'd been about to say something else.

"I love it," she said softly. "It's too large for us, and very drafty in winter. But it's—it's *real* somehow. People have lived exciting lives there, and they've all left their mark."

The sun had dropped a little and now it touched the windows, turning them to brilliant gold. A spring breeze rustled the trees, then died away.

"It must be the most peaceful spot in the world," Philip said. "I can see why you'd love it. How lucky you are, Jenny."

As they drove up, Betterton was in position at the foot of the stone steps that led up to the front door. His butler's rig was immaculate save for a little fraying here and there, and he greeted Philip with a perfect little bow.

Mrs. Betterton was waiting for them inside, with the news that the Elizabethan Room was ready. She was a sturdy woman in her sixties with eyes that twinkled.

Philip glanced around him as they climbed the oak staircase.

"I'll show you around later," Jenny promised. "This is it—" She flung open a door into a large oak-paneled room with a red carpet. In the center stood a vast four-poster bed. Philip regarded it, stunned.

"It's perfectly safe," Jenny promised him, laughing. "It really won't collapse and smother you in the curtains."

"How did you know that's what I was thinking?"

"Because it's what most people say. Be careful of the floor. It's a bit uneven. If you want to open a window, make it this one. This door leads to what used to be a little dressing room. One of the previous Carristers turned it into a bathroom."

Betterton coughed discreetly from the doorway. His sense of propriety was as old-fashioned as the rest of him, and he was signaling her that he had no intention of leaving this young man's bedroom until she did.

"So that's it," Jenny finished. "I'll leave you to unpack."

*

THE LIGHT was fading fast when the train drew up at the tiny station early that evening. Only one passenger alighted, a tall, pright man with a military bearing and face that might have been carved from rock. At the sight of Jenny, his face broke into a flowing smile and he leaned down to engulf her in a hug.

He was almost six foot four, a foot taller than herself, and to Jenny this was no reason why he'd never realized she was adult. The gaze he turned on her now was piercing. Sharp blue eyes looked down below bushy white eyebrows, which matched his heavy mustache and head of thick snowy hair.

Jenny had a stab of relief to see how well he looked after the journey. Now he folded his long frame into the cramped pace of the car and muttered, "Not too fast, now," as he always did.

Once out of the village, she ventured to put her foot down a little.

"You're going too fast," he said at once.

"I don't want to be too long getting home. We have a visitor. He came to see the Dormer ceiling and he's staying the night."

"I hope you entertained him properly?"

"He's in the Elizabethan Room. He said he didn't mind having a late dinner."

"What sort of man is he?"

She found it difficult to describe Philip Thornhill. He was there in her mind, his face strong and gentle, eyes alight with humor. She found herself remem-

bering how his shirt was open at the throat, revealing the smooth brown column of his neck; the power implicit in his large, shapely hands.

But she confined herself to a prosaic description that made no mention of Philip's disturbing charm.

"He's American, from Massachusetts, about thirty-one. He hired John Terris's car and the engine caught fire."

"He doesn't know much about cars if he hired that old bone shaker." Sir Leonard grunted.

Jenny promptly leapt to Philip's defense. "There isn't another rental car for miles around. It's not his fault if John Terris is a con man."

As Jenny spoke they were approaching the place where she had collected Philip. The car was still standing there, and so was John Terris's own. The man himself was standing in the road frowning. Jenny had to force herself to stop. She disliked Mr. Terris, a petty-minded bully whose manners seldom rose above brusqueness.

"So you've arrived at last," he said, without preamble.

"I didn't know you were waiting for me. Mr. Terris."

"Well, you've got the key, haven't you?" He jerked his head toward the lamed car. "I've come to tow it, but I can't get into the thing."

"What makes you think I've got your ignition key, Mr. Terris?" said Jenny, bewildered.

"You've got the fellow that hired the car staying with you!" he exploded.

"Perhaps you would be kind enough to tell me what you are talking about?" Sir Leonard had gone to stand beside John Terris, who was immediately at a disadvantage, having to look up several inches.

"I hired this car to a Philip Thornhill this afternoon. He rang and told me what had happened. He didn't say anything about the key. I thought he'd left it with the car, but he hasn't. Then I saw you

coming, so I reckoned he'd given it to you."

"He never mentioned it to me," Jenny said. "But surely you've got another ignition key?"

"T'other one's lost," Terris snapped. "I told him that."

"Then I expect he has the key for you at Carrister Hall," said Sir Leonard frostily. "You will have to come and collect it."

He stalked around to the passenger side and folded himself into the car again, leaving Terris standing in the road with a dark red flush infusing his bull neck.

"Terris's method is simple," Sir Leonard said. "He's no doubt had a week's money in advance for that car. He will refuse to refund a penny, and challenge Mr. Thornhill to take him to court. He is a tourist, and will find this impractical. Unless, of course, he can recover his money by brute force?"

"No, I don't see him doing that," Jenny said, just as there was a violent honking from behind her. She had to pull over sharply to let Terris rush past on the narrow road.

They arrived at Carrister Hall a good five minutes after him, to find Terris blustering in a raucous voice that made Jenny feel sick. Philip, however, seemed unperturbed. He was semi-perched on the edge of the hall table, hands in his pockets.

"I'd only had that car half an hour when it broke down," he said to Terris. "You had eighty pounds from me, a full week's money, which I am entitled to have refunded."

"If I find a mechanical fault, perhaps I'll consider it," snapped Terris. "But how do I know what you did to that car to damage it?"

Jenny took a step forward, but Philip held up a hand. She gasped as she met his eyes. They were bleak and hard, the eyes of a man used to being obeyed at once.

"I didn't damage your car, Mr. Terris, and you know it," he said coldly. "Now I want every penny back. I'll settle for nothing less."

"*You'll* what?" Terris sneered. "Thinl you can take it off me, do you?"

Jenny shivered. There was an air o menace about him.

"I won't need to," said Philip. "You're going to give it to me."

"What the hell are you talkin' about?"

"I'm talking about the police, Mr Terris. A police station is the proper plac for that key."

There was an ugly silence. John Terris moved a step closer to Philip. "Give me that key," he grated.

"We'll discuss the key when you've returned my money."

"I said, *give me the key.*"

When there was no reply Terris shot out a hand as if to grasp Philip by the throat, but he found himself checked by hard fingers that caught his wrist and held it steady.

"Think you can take it off me, dc you?" Philip repeated Terris's own words.

For a long moment their eyes held. Then Terris pulled away. A deep crimson flush creeping up the back of his neck testified to his inner rage.

"I don't carry that kind of money around with me," he snapped. "I can only give you fifty."

"Not a penny less than eighty."

Terris swore and pulled some more money out of his pocket. Philip counted it.

"Eighty," he said pleasantly. "Would you like a receipt?"

"Receipt be damned!" Terris howled. "Give me that key!"

Philip buttoned the money into his back pocket. "I don't have it," he said. "I handed it over to the police here half an hour ago."

There was a strangled noise from Terris, and the sound of a slow intake of

breath from Sir Leonard, whose eyes were fixed on Philip as though he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"You—" Terris let the second word out violently. "You told me—"

"I told you that a police station was the proper place for that key. And it is. I never said I'd give it back to you. You imagined that bit for yourself, as I knew you would."

John Terris's face went such an alarming color that Jenny wondered if he was going to have a heart attack.

"If I were you," said Philip, "I'd get back to the car now. The police should be collecting it at any time."

"You'll be very sorry for this," shouted Terris from the doorway. "I don't let people get away with cheating me."

"Neither do I, Mr. Terris," Philip said quietly.

The front door slammed behind Terris. As if by a signal the characters in the hall began to move again. It was Philip who spoke first, holding out his hand to Sir Leonard. "I should apologize for creating a disturbance in your home, sir. I'm Philip Thornhill."

"There is no need to apologize, Mr. Thornhill," said Sir Leonard, shaking hands. "It was a pleasure to see you treat that scoundrel as he deserved. Now, I suggest we postpone further discussion until we all meet for dinner, which will be served in one hour."

To please Sir Leonard, who liked her to dress for dinner, Jenny had made herself an evening gown from emerald green velvet that had been going cheap in a clearance sale. It brought out the green of her eyes, and its richness made her creamy skin glow. She had coaxed a professional job out of her rickety old sewing machine, so the most astute eye could not have told that this was a homemade dress.

She took a last look in the mirror and shivered slightly. The dress was held up by thin straps that left her arms and

shoulders bare. Normally she would have waited until the weather was warmer before wearing it. But a lacy shawl would keep the chill air away.

As she started down the staircase she could see the door to the library standing open, and a light within. At the sound of her footsteps Philip came out and looked upward. She did not miss Philip's start when he saw her, or the look of pleasure on his face.

He had changed into a snow-white shirt and charcoal suit, his appearance so immaculate that even Sir Leonard must approve. And he looked, Jenny thought, more handsome than any man had the right to.

"Hey—" he said in a puzzled voice, "little feller?"

She smiled at the repetition of his first words to her, but when Philip took her hand with a flourish of old-world gallantry, she knew her transformation had been a triumph.

"Betterton said we'd all meet in the library for sherry before dinner," he said as he led her inside. "I was afraid I'd come down too early."

"I'm sorry about that," she said. "One of us should have been here before you." She handed him his sherry and moved toward the fire, glad of the warmth.

"A real log fire," said Philip appreciatively. "That's the touch that makes it perfect for me. He must be fitter than he looks if he carries logs around all the time."

"Well, between you and me," Jenny said, "If you weren't here I'd have done it, but don't tell him I told you."

He was giving her that strange look that she had seen earlier, but his voice was light as he said, "And what else do you do—apart from change wheels and carry logs?"

"I look after the chickens and the kitchen garden. I have a secretarial job that I go out to two days a week."

"And then you come home and work some more. Tell me, who chops the logs you fetch?"

"I do."

"In other words," he said quietly, "without you, this place would all fall apart."

Jenny was instantly embarrassed, but when she tried to reply, something funny had happened to her breath. Philip's mouth was smiling, but his eyes were full of a sudden hot glow that made her tremble.

There was the sound of a footstep on the hall tiles, and Sir Leonard came into the room. He greeted Philip, apologized for his lateness and made gruff pronouncements about the weather as he refilled their glasses.

Jenny said little as they ate dinner. She was watching the two men, noticing things about them. Sir Leonard must be much more tired than she had thought, for a sharpness had crept into his manner. It was not unusual for him to question a guest closely, but to Jenny's acute ear his questions were barked out, his eyes glittering intently as he waited for Philip's replies. He must be very weary indeed to allow this breach in his perfect courtesy.

"My mother was English," Philip told them. "Her family comes from a place called Mettenham."

"That's about thirty miles away," said Sir Leonard, "You will be visiting it, I suppose? It's changed a good deal in the last few years. It won't be as your mother remembers it."

"Well, she doesn't recall much of the place. She was only ten when the family moved to the States. But she did say her family had been around for a long time and the churchyard was full of Rhynhams."

"So you want to trace your ancestors. Got long to do it in?"

"A month or so," Philip said.

"You're not an academic, are you?" Sir Leonard inquired. "They're the only

people I know who get holidays that long."

"No, hotels are my line. I haven't had any real time off for three years. I figured if my staff can't manage without me for a while I haven't trained them properly. Besides, I'm thinking of expanding over here. It'll pay me to stay awhile and look around."

Jenny regarded him, puzzled. If he owned a chain of hotels, he wasn't hard up. Yet something about him still reminded her of a vagabond.

Rogues and vagabonds. That was what people used to call actors. Jenny gave herself a little mental shake, and a lecture about being fanciful. Philip was neither an actor nor a rogue.

"I set out without any firm plans," he was saying. "I landed at Heathrow yesterday, took the first train up here and stepped off it with no clear idea what I was going to do next."

"Why here?" Jenny asked. "Mettenham is much larger."

"Then I'd have missed the Dormer ceiling," Philip pointed out. "Besides, I like it here. It has atmosphere."

"Then I hope you'll make a long stay with us," Sir Leonard invited. "Guests brighten the place up. You can always hire a decent car in Mettenham and use it to commute back and forth."

Jenny looked surprised. She had not expected this open-ended invitation. Her heart gave a leap of pleasure at the thought of keeping Philip at Carrister Hall.

"And you might investigate our parish registers," she said, trying to sound casual. "Some Thornhills are buried around here."

"It's a very, very common name," Philip noted. "There are probably Thornhills all over England. But staying here is a great idea, if it wouldn't be putting you out."

"You'll be able to cope, won't you, my dear?" Sir Leonard looked at Jenny.

"Easily. One extra person is nothing," she assured them both. Her heart was singing as she rose from the table. "I'll leave you to your port now," she said.

"We'll join you before long," Sir Leonard assured her.

Mrs. Betterton brought her tea in the library. Jenny's joy that Philip would be staying for some time was almost frightening. She had known him for only a few hours, yet already the thought of seeing him no more made her heart sink.

Jenny had little experience of physical attraction. She had gone out with young men from the village, enduring their clumsy attentions just long enough to become convinced that kissing was vastly overrated. She had never before met a man who made her yearn to kiss him.

She heard the sound of the two men crossing the hall and forced herself to calm down. They seemed to be talking amiably.

"Is your mother still alive?" Sir Leonard asked as he closed the door.

"Yes, sir, and I have two younger sisters, who both live with her." Philip smiled at Jenny and sat near her. "I travel a lot, but when I'm in Boston I stay with them."

"And they spoil you, I suppose?" Sir Leonard asked.

"Well, my mother does, but both my sisters are card-carrying feminists." Philip chuckled. "So I've got used to making my own coffee."

"What you need is a wife," growled the old man. "Wives don't have time for that sort of nonsense. I knew some suffragettes when I was a boy. Funny thing was, they were always prettier than other girls. Always had a pack of young fellows trotting around after them. What they wanted rights for I could never tell."

Jenny bit her lip. Even her patience was tried when the old man was in what she called his "prehistoric moods."

When Philip bade her good-night, later that evening, he asked, "Is it a workday tomorrow, Jenny?"

"No, I don't go in for a couple of days yet."

"Will you be my guide, show me the ceiling and the rest of the Hall—and the district?"

"I'd love to," she said joyfully.

"It's a date, then. Good night, Jenny. Sleep well."

She moved away from him on feet that wanted to dance. There would be no sleep for her tonight. You didn't sleep when your life had just been turned upside down.

*

"I THOUGHT we'd start with the picture gallery," Jenny suggested, "because that way the rest of the house makes more sense."

They were standing in a long room, lit by skylights, at the top of the house. The morning sun streamed in on them, casting a red-gold aureole over Jenny's gleaming hair.

"That's our 'founding father,'" she said, pointing to a small portrait of an ugly man with fleshy features. "Giles Carrister, a yeoman who was knighted by Henry V in 1415. He also got a grant of land, but he had no money, so he found himself a wealthy merchant with a plain daughter and no son. He used his wife's dowry to build this house, and when his father-in-law died, Giles inherited everything. He and his wife are supposed to have been very happy. They had two sons, and Giles made sure they were respectable. He'd just been an adventurer himself."

After a time, Jenny reached the large, well-painted portrait of a thin, aesthetic-looking man in cavalier costume.

"Sir Justin is probably my most interesting ancestor," she said. "He supported the royalists in the Civil War, but when Cromwell took over, Sir Justin

married the daughter of one of his friends and was allowed to keep his lands. When the royalists came *back*, Justin actually managed to ingratiate himself with Charles II. He's supposed to have been a great wit, and the king loved wit, so he forgave Justin his disloyalty."

"I know that kind. He'd have gone into a revolving door behind you and come out in front. It's there in his face."

"After that the family are a bit dull. We didn't produce another really fascinating rascal until the early nineteenth century. Another Sir Justin—over there. This was painted when he was young and terribly handsome. He was a crony of the Prince Regent, and that's when the rot set in, because Justin spent a fortune trying to keep up with him. In the end he got so badly in debt that he had to break the entail on the estates, and start selling the land."

"I didn't know you could break an entail."

"I'm vague about the details. I only know that before Justin, the estate had to be passed on intact to the next male heir, but he made some legal arrangements that enabled him to sell parcels of land, and leave the rest to whomever he liked. It caused endless rows, because Justin hated his son, and kept threatening to leave everything to his daughter. In fact, a fortune hunter married her on the strength of it. Justin laughed so much at the wedding that he brought on an apoplectic fit. They buried him a week later."

"And who inherited?" Philip said, fascinated.

"The son, of course. Justin had no intention of leaving it to his daughter. That's why he was laughing." Jenny chuckled, then paused at a door. "This leads to the roof," she said. "There's a lovely view when the weather's like this."

He followed her up and found himself on a flat part of the roof. In the clear, bright air they could see for miles. Woods and fields were spread before them, glowing with the fresh promise of spring.

A river glinted in the distance. Philip drew a deep, reverent breath.

"It's unbelievable," he said quietly. "I can see why you love it."

"It's wonderful, isn't it?" she said. "It's at moments like this that I'm most grateful to poor old Justin, because if he hadn't broken the entail this place might never be mine. As it is, I'll inherit it."

"Isn't there anyone who could try to stake a prior claim?"

"There's no family left. I'm an only child. So were my father and my grandfather. And they're both dead. Grandpa Leonard had a brother, but he died without any sons. There are no men at all, so the title will die with Grandpa. He can't leave me that."

"He's left the house and land to me, because there isn't anyone else. But he'd love it if there were a direct male heir."

"You mean—he'd leave you with nothing? I can't believe that."

"Oh, no." She smiled impishly. "In Grandpa's ideal world, there'd be an heir of the right age, and he'd arrange for me to marry him. He'd love to think that one day I'd be Lady Carrister, and that's the only way I could be."

"Arrange for you to marry him?" said Philip, astounded. "But that comes out of the Ark. Surely he wouldn't force you to marry someone you didn't love?"

"Of course not. He loves me far too well for that. But because he does he'd try to persuade me it was 'suitable.' Grandpa would do everything to talk me into it, because he'd be sure it was for my happiness. Don't forget, when he was born, Queen Victoria was on the throne. She died when he was four, and he can actually remember seeing her funeral procession."

She shivered a little, for she had no jacket. At once Philip put an arm around her shoulders and drew her toward the door. She would have stayed here longer for the pleasure of his warm strength about her, but he was leading her indoors. When they were back in the por-

trait gallery she resumed the tour of the pictures.

"This is Justin's son," she said. "He carried on drinking and gambling, so that more of the Carrister heritage had to be sold off. All that's left now is about half the original land, and a house that we can't afford to repair."

"And a lot of Carrister pride," Philip said. "You were bursting with pride, even when you were talking about the scoundrels."

She pulled a rueful face. "Well, most people's ancestors were scoundrels. But it's not what they did—it's that they were an unbroken line, and I'm one of them. This is their home as well as mine, *and I'm going to keep it for them.*" Her voice rose to a note of passion.

"Hey, steady," Philip said. "I'm not trying to take it away from you."

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's just that so many people are."

"Like who?"

"Oh, it would take too long to go into. And it's not always people—it's circumstances."

"Does Sir Leonard feel as much under siege as you do?"

"He doesn't know I'm worried, and he mustn't know. Please, don't tell him I've talked to you like this."

"But Jenny," he said, frowning. "It's just you against the world. You're not big enough for that kind of battle."

"Of course I am," she said, looking at him with suspiciously bright eyes. "Please forget I said anything, Philip. I've got lots more to show you."

His eyes were warm and anxious, but he said no more.

She halted again in front of a large picture of a middle-aged man, who bore a marked resemblance to Sir Leonard, seated on the grass. On his left sat a younger version of himself, aged about eighteen. On the man's right was an enormous, clumsily painted Labrador, clearly added later by another artist.

"That was my great-great-grandfather, Sir Henry," Jenny pointed out. "The boy beside him is Grandpa, at eighteen."

"What happened to the other side?" demanded Philip.

"That's the result of the family scandal," Jenny said.

"There were originally three people in the picture. The third one was George, Grandpa's elder brother. It was painted in 1914, just before they went off to serve in the Great War. But while he was in France, poor George lost his nerve and ran away from the enemy guns. He was charged with cowardice."

"What about shell shock?" Philip asked. "A lot of guys looked like cowards who weren't."

"It was only in the second year of the war. I don't think they knew much about shell shock yet. Maybe someone would have spoken up for him at his court-martial, but he died before there could be one."

She looked up at Sir Henry's face on the canvas. Consciously or not, the artist had captured a look of bleak implacability in the gray eyes. "I've always thought Sir Henry must have been a pretty unpleasant man," she said. "Cold and hard, and totally lacking in understanding. He obviously had no sympathy for anyone who deviated from his rigid standards."

"One of those characters who find it impossible to forgive," Philip murmured.

There were no more paintings. The next few pictures were large photographs, many of them sepia-colored.

"What about your mother?" Philip asked. "I don't see any pictures of her."

"No, that's right. I haven't heard from my mother in years. I just prefer not to think about her," said Jenny in a quiet voice.

"And not to talk about her either? All right, I'll mind my own business."

She gave him a half smile that might have been meant as an apology, and they left the picture gallery.

When they came at last to the banqueting hall and the Dormer ceiling, Philip stood in silence, staring upward. At last he said, "Now I understand why he left England. I should think he was trying to escape being lynched."

Jenny laughed. "Well, I've always hated it. But at the time it was very much admired."

"He was obviously way outside his element," Philip said seriously. "His pen-and-ink drawings are really fine."

He began to stroll around the rest of the hall. "A minstrels' gallery," he muttered. "Is that genuine?"

"Oh, yes, it's sixteenth-century. I've locked the door that leads up there because the stairs aren't very safe. What I'd love to do is restore this room."

"It would cost a fortune, but it would be worth it," Philip said, almost to himself. "People would come from miles to stay in a place like this—"

"Well, they're not going to," said Jenny at once. "The idea of turning Carrister Hall into a hotel!"

"Did I say that?" he asked mildly.

"It was written all over your face. You said yesterday that you were going to set up hotels over here, but not in my home you're not."

"All right, little spitfire. Don't blame me because it crossed my mind. I can't look at a building without considering it as a hotel. And anyway, hasn't it occurred to you that this could solve your problems? When your great-grandfather dies you might have to sell to pay the death duties. If I bought it from you, you'd get a good price, and if you wanted to stay here, you could run the hotel for me. You'd win all the way around."

She stared at him; her eyes hard. "I'd rather go penniless than see Carrister Hall in the hands of people who don't love it. I don't want your money, and neither would Grandpa."

"I wouldn't have dared make such an offer to him."

"You shouldn't have made it to *me*," she said fiercely.

She began to show him the rest of the house, but her heart was no longer in it, and he seemed to sense this. "Why don't you show me the countryside?" he said. "I feel like a ride in the fresh air."

PHILIP INSISTED on paying for the hire of her horse and they waited together while their mounts were brought out. Philip's brows rose as he saw the snorting beast that was led toward Jenny.

"I ride Samson whenever I can," she assured him. "I know he looks fierce, but that's just high spirits."

They headed for the open country, and at once she gave Samson his head. When they reached the downs, she found that the gallop had turned into a race as some instinct told each what was in the other's mind.

She easily got ahead of him, and turned to wait. The wind had stung her cheeks till they glowed pink, and the curls that escaped her riding hat had been whipped into a tangle. As he came up to her she could see the frank admiration in his eyes.

"I've been waiting to catch you as you fall," he said, "but you control that brute as if you'd hypnotized him."

They cantered on down to a stream where they dismounted and let their mounts drink, before tying them up; and taking a stroll along the bank.

"Talking of your being my landlady," he said, "we haven't discussed the terms."

She told him what they were:

"You can't make anything on that," he said. "Let me pay you a decent rate."

"It's quite enough, thank you. I don't need charity," Jenny said sharply.

"This seems to be my day for putting my foot in it with you," Philip replied. "I didn't intend it like that."

"And I should apologize for biting your head off," said Jenny.

He slipped a strong arm around her shoulder and hugged her close.

"I admire the battle you're putting up, Jenny. You're the strongest person I know. The trouble with that is that weak people cling to you until your strength is exhausted."

She could have wept with relief at his understanding, but she defended Grandpa and the Bettertons.

"They're not weak," she insisted. "They're just old. They've been strong in their day, and they looked after me."

"But now you're looking after the three of them. And they're draining away your youth." He pulled off her riding hat and the tangled curls fell about her face. "Just how young are you?"

"Twenty."

"Good grief! You don't look anything like it!" He had his hands on her shoulders and was looking into her eyes with the same disturbing look she had seen last night.

She found herself drawn against his chest and the next moment her head was pinning as his mouth captured hers. She clung to him weakly, feeling her world dissolve. His arms were like steel bands across her back, and the warmth of his body reached her through her clothes. The clean, healthy, masculine smell of him was in her nostrils, making her senses riot, filling her with half-understood yearnings.

He took his mouth from hers, but still held her close, and she could feel him trembling against her. Then he was kissing her again with engulfing intensity, exploring the warmth of her mouth, drawing forth her eager response. She ran her hand through his thick hair, drawing him closer, wishing she could stay in his arms forever. But at last she felt him pull away.

"I think we'd better go," he said. "I should have known better than to be alone with you in an isolated spot like

this." He touched her cheek lightly with one finger. "And don't smile at me with those mysterious green eyes, or I'll forget my good resolutions."

Her heart was singing as they drove back to Carrister Hall along the same road they had taken only yesterday. When she reached the bend in the road, Jenny slowed down for a look at the house, but suddenly she made an explosive sound.

"Look at that car in the drive! He's here again."

"Who's here?" Philip demanded.

"The enemy. I told that man I'd shoot him if he came around worrying Grandpa again, and I will."

She was driving hell-for-leather toward the house, eyes fixed on a black car that stood in the drive. As she jumped out, the big front door opened, and Betterton came down the steps.

"Where is he?" Jenny demanded. "Did you let him in?"

"Naturally I refused, Miss," said Betterton. "But he's not interested in the house. He says they're going to knock it down."

"Over my dead body," Jenny muttered.

"Who's going to knock the house down?" Philip demanded.

"The council—if they can get their hands on it," Jenny said bitterly. "They've been trying for long enough. They want to buy up this area for a co-operative farm. The house would be the first thing to go."

"Can they force you to sell?"

"Yes, if they're united over it. Luckily for us, they're not, but there'll be elections in a few months, and I'm afraid they'll manage it then. They certainly think they're going to, so they come snooping around."

"Can they do that?"

"We can keep them out of the house, but they want the land. We can't physically throw them off that."

"But what do they hope to gain?"

Jenny sighed. "It's a kind of intimidation. And every time Grandpa sees them he gets upset. One day—" She broke off and her mouth trembled.

At once she felt his hands on her shoulders. They were warm and comforting as he gave her a little shake.

"Then we'll just have to make sure he doesn't meet them this time, won't we?" he said. "Is that the man?" He was looking over her shoulder.

"That's him." Jenny felt herself stiffening. "His name's Jack Esterby."

"I want you to go inside." This was said so quietly that it took her a moment to realize that Philip was taking over the situation.

"I can manage him—" she said.

"But you can't eject him from the land. You just said so."

She tore herself away from him and ran down the steps.

"I told you not to come back—" she raged at Esterby.

He shrugged. "This'll be publicly owned land in a few months, and I have every right to see the property of the people I was elected to represent." He gave the house a disparaging look that made Jenny clench her fists.

But before she could do anything, Philip had interposed.

"I said you were to go inside," he told her firmly.

"Don't give me orders," she said furiously. "I'm not going till I've dealt with him."

"You're going now."

She gasped. Philip's eyes had the same look as when he'd dealt with Terris. Fuming, she marched inside as Betterton held the door for her.

Immediately she heard Sir Leonard's voice, calling her, and he appeared, descending the stairs. Three steps from the bottom he seemed to lose his balance, rolling down the last few feet to the hall floor. Jenny and Betterton rushed to him, and leaning on their support, he heaved himself to his feet, cursing heartily. It was

a robust sound that showed he was more annoyed than hurt.

Once in the library, he shooed them away.

"Stop fussing, the pair of you. There's nothing broken. Nothing that a good stiff whiskey won't put right."

When he was clutching his glass, he said, "What was going on out there?"

"Nothing," Jenny said quickly. "Just Philip and I coming back from a ride."

"Splendid. Do you good to get out."

Jenny escaped from him as quickly as she could and ran to the hall window. Esterby's car was fast disappearing. Whatever Philip had said to him had been effective. After a moment he came in.

"How did you make him go?" Jenny asked him.

"You won't be troubled by him again, that's all that matters."

"It certainly is not all that matters! What did you mean by ordering me off my own front steps?"

"I felt I could deal with him better without you there. I said things I couldn't have said with a lady present."

"But that's *Victorian!*" she exploded.

"Blame it on the house. Its atmosphere is getting to me."

Then he went upstairs, laughing, as she stood in the hall, wishing she weren't too old to stamp her foot in frustration.

THE NEXT DAY Philip vanished after breakfast to go riding alone. When he returned in the early afternoon, Jenny was ready to deliver the newly typed chapter to Dr. Whickham. Philip elected to come into King's Carrister to do some shopping and meet Jenny later.

He arrived at five o'clock, and Dr. Whickham pressed him to stay for sherry. While Jenny collected her papers the two men talked. They got on well, especially when Dr. Whickham mentioned his next project, a book about the pilgrim fathers. Jenny sat back and enjoyed the sight of Philip in earnest conversation,

the intensity in his dark eyes, his mobile features. She was feeling utterly content when the door opened and Olympia walked in.

Dr. Whickham hadn't been expecting his daughter, and in the confusion of joyful greetings Jenny sat silent, her heart sinking. Why did the beautiful Olympia, whom no man could resist, have to arrive now?

Olympia was a vision of glamour, groomed to perfection, every blond hair in place. She wore a suede skirt and sleeveless jacket, with a green silk blouse beneath. And even Jenny could tell that the musky perfume wafting in her direction was wickedly expensive.

Reluctantly Jenny introduced her to Philip, turning away from the appreciation in his expression. Olympia, too, was clearly pleased with what she found. She treated Philip to her most glorious smile, and sat on the sofa beside him, demanding that he tell her all about himself. While he complied, Jenny tried to concentrate as Dr. Whickham hurriedly ran through the list of what he wanted her to do.

"Go through these two notebooks and type out the longer passages," he told her. "It's for the book on the pilgrim fathers. I want to see how they read when you've set them out. Do the one with the blue cover first."

She put both books into her large bag and turned to find Olympia pressing another sherry on her.

"I won't, thanks," she said. "I'm driving and we ought to leave."

"Oh, dear, I've poured it now. Give it to my father, would you, Jenny dear."

Dr. Whickham had crossed the room to talk to Philip.

Jenny handed him the glass. "I'm driving." She smiled.

Philip took the hint. "Sorry to have kept you, sir. Ready when you are, Jenny."

Olympia handed Jenny her bag. "I'm sure we're going to see lots of each other

while I'm home," she said, and bade farewell without looking at Philip. Jenny wondered if she'd imagined the predatory look in Olympia's eyes earlier.

On the way home she began to feel more cheerful, and when Philip noted that Olympia seemed nice, Jenny was even able to agree. "The only time I've seen her less than charming is when I call her Ollie. She says it makes her sound like an owl in a children's book."

Philip grinned. "Well, not everyone likes their name abbreviated. Don't you ever wish people would call you Jennifer?"

"No," she said abruptly.

"Why not?"

"Because it isn't my name."

"What is it short for?"

"Never mind."

"Don't you like your name?"

"No, I don't."

He sighed. "I've put my foot in it again, haven't I?"

"Yes," she said firmly.

Over dinner that night Philip and Sir Leonard got into a spirited discussion about horses. Jenny did not join in, and when she left them to their port she slipped up to her room to fetch the typing, thinking that it would be a good time to read the notes.

As soon as she plunged her hand into her bag she knew something was wrong. The blue notebook was missing. She began to retrace her actions of the afternoon, too intent on this to hear the doorbell. She had put both books into the bag, she was quite sure of it. Then Olympia had offered her another sherry...

"Miss Whickham, Miss," said Betterton from the door of the library. To Jenny's relief Olympia was advancing toward her, the missing notebook in her hand.

"Oh, thank goodness," Jenny burst out.

"Jenny, my dear, I'm so sorry. It's all my fault. You were putting it on the desk

and forgot to pick it up. And now Dad says it's more urgent than he thought. He needs it back, typed, tomorrow afternoon."

Jenny flicked over the pages. "I can manage if I work fast tomorrow morning."

Olympia was wearing a low-cut black jersey dress that hugged her voluptuous bosom and showed off the whiteness of her skin, and her incredible blondness. Jenny wished that there were no need for Philip to see this vision, but a few moments later the two men entered the library. Civility compelled Jenny to invite Olympia to stay, and she soon joined Philip on the sofa.

As Jenny began to pour coffee, Sir Leonard was there behind her, muttering crossly, "What's she doing here, dressed like a hussy?"

"Hush, Grandpa. She isn't a hussy."

"Did you invite her?"

"No, but—"

"Then she's a hussy. In my day a girl who went chasing after a young man was called a hussy, because that's what she was."

"She didn't come chasing Philip. She very kindly came to give me a notebook I left behind."

"How did you come to do that?"

"I don't know. I thought I'd put it in my bag, but she says I left it on the table."

Sir Leonard stared at her very hard. His voice was gruff and kind. "You're a dear little girl, Jenny. When it comes to doing a job and keeping us all going, you're as clever as they come. But not when it comes to the things women are supposed to be clever about."

"Which things?" she challenged him indignantly.

"Other women, girl. Their motives—and their methods." He took his coffee and turned back into the room.

Jenny's jaw dropped. Like all truths, once it was spelled out, this one became obvious. She had put the notebook into

her bag, but then Olympia had distracted her long enough to take it out again.

Jenny advanced to the sofa, bearing two cups of coffee, one of which she handed to Olympia. "Here you are, Ollie." She smiled sweetly. "It's black, just as you like it."

Not by so much as a tremor did Olympia reveal her displeasure.

"Thanks, Jenny," Philip said, reaching for his cup. "Olympia tells me you have to work tomorrow, so it'll be a good chance for me to go to Mettenham. Olympia's going to drive me over." He gave her his warmest smile. "You shouldn't have let me take up so much of your time."

"I was up-to-date till Ollie's father changed his plans," said Jenny crossly.

"I told Dad you wouldn't mind," Olympia said. "He was so worried. We talked just before he went up to bed."

So he's in bed, thought Jenny, with grim appreciation of these tactics. I can't call him to find out if he really did want his typing done by tomorrow afternoon, and even if I could, what good would it do me? Olympia's car is a two-seater. She's taken care of every detail.

Jenny felt utterly wretched.

"Well, it's late and I must be going," Olympia said. "I'll call for you at nine, Philip. And would you mind seeing me to my car? I'm so afraid of those steps in the dark, with my high heels."

Before Philip could move, Sir Leonard was on his feet.

"As your host, that must be my privilege," he declared.

There was no way Olympia could protest, but as she turned in the doorway she smiled directly at Jenny and had her revenge.

"Good night—" she said, "*Guinevere!*"

DINNER THE following evening was a depressing meal. Neither Jenny nor Sir Leonard felt much like eating, and nobody else was present.

"She actually stood there and told him my *name*," Jenny said with loathing. "Guinevere! I ask you!"

"Yes. Whoever took your mother to see *Camelot* had a great deal to answer for," mused Sir Leonard. "But tell me what happened today."

"I worked myself to a standstill, and Dr. Whickham said it had all been a mistake. He hadn't asked me to come in today at all."

"Of course not," Sir Leonard said. "The whole thing was a put-up job. The hussy was determined to get him to herself. You'll lose him if you're not careful."

"Grandpa!" she gasped. "He isn't mine to lose."

"But you want him to be, don't you? Think I can't recognize when a girl's in love, at my time of life? I've seen enough of 'em."

Jenny was glad when Sir Leonard elected to go to bed early. She wanted to be alone to think. His assertion that she was in love with Philip had startled her, but she had no desire to dispute it. It was one more thing she had failed to notice for herself, though how could she have, when she had never been in love before? She was experiencing for the first time the mysterious chemistry that made one man stand out from all others and a woman long to be with him every moment of the night and day. She was also feeling the agonizing sensation of jealousy.

When Philip hadn't returned at one, she went miserably to bed and fell asleep. She woke to find it still dark, and the house very quiet. It was 5:00 a.m. She lay there for a few minutes, too wakeful to go back to sleep. Then she got up and began to dress in her old jeans and sweater.

It was several years now since Jenny had discovered the joy of going out into the woods and sitting quietly to watch the dawn come up. These magic hours were her own precious secret—and they helped get her through the bad times, when her worries threatened to engulf her.

When she was ready she began to creep downstairs. Her old Wellington boots were in a cupboard under the stairs, and she'd just sat on the bottom step to haul them on when a noise from the library made her listen intently. It was a scraping sound. From the door, which was slightly ajar, she could see that the room was in darkness. If Grandpa or Philip were in there, they would have put on a light. That left only burglars.

The door to the dining room stood wide open. Without putting on her boots, Jenny tiptoed inside and headed for the fireplace and a hefty poker. There was no fear in her, only a deadly temper that yet one more person had come to violate her home.

With poker in hand she crept back across the hall and gently nudged open the library door. Through an open window, its curtain drawn, a faint light cast a silver-gray beam across part of the room, leaving the rest in pitch darkness.

She could hear a creaking, which seemed to come from the leather armchair near the fireplace. She moved about the room silently, managing to stay out of the light. She was holding her breath, trying not to give herself away, but without warning there was a scuffle near her. She gasped with surprise and raised the hand holding the poker. But fingers of steel clasped her wrist, holding her arm rigid. Another hand went around her waist, and a familiar voice said, "Really, honey, how damn stupid can you get?"

"Philip!" she gasped. "What are you—?"

The last words were smothered by his mouth closing over her own. She heard the clang as the poker hit the floor; then

Philip was crushing her angrily to him. She could sense his anger in every movement of his hands, in the harsh way his lips bruised and plundered her.

"Wh—why did you do that?" she asked in a trembling voice, when he had released her.

"Because it seemed a better idea than shaking you," he answered grimly. "From the poker, I take it you thought I was a burglar, and you were going to tackle me. Have you *no* sense? I was a combat soldier. We were trained to jump people in the dark. Luckily for you I heard you gasp and realized you weren't a burglar."

"Well, anyway, what were you doing in the dark?"

She could just make out his wry grin. "Climbing in the window, if you must know. Betterton locked up, and I don't have a key."

"He must have thought you were already back," she said.

"I probably would have been if Olympia and I hadn't had a disagreement."

"Don't tell me you've been fighting till this hour?"

"Not fighting. Walking home." He made his way back to the armchair. Jenny put on a reading lamp. He had pulled off a shoe and was massaging a foot.

"Is it very bad?" she asked.

"About how you'd expect after a five-hour walk," he said, wincing.

"Five hours? Where on earth did you leave the car?"

"I have no idea. Luckily there was a good moon. And I did not 'leave the car.' I was tricked into getting out. Then she drove off."

"But why?" she gasped. "What on earth did you do?"

He scowled at her. "It wasn't what I did, it was what I wouldn't do. Olympia is a very modern girl. Excessively so for my taste. I found myself having to say 'thank you—but no thank you.' I prefer to do my own chasing."

Jenny's lips twitched. "You don't mean to say that she suggested—and when you wouldn't—?"

"Precisely. I can't tell you how embarrassed I was. Do you mind if we drop the subject, Jenny?"

There was an unaccustomed ill-tempered edge on his voice, but Jenny felt he could be forgiven. Philip's dignity had been wounded.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" she said, in a voice from which all trace of laughter had been carefully censored.

"You know just what to say to a man," he said. "Thanks, Jenny. I'm parched."

She whisked herself into the kitchen where she could enjoy an explosive fit of the giggles without offending him. Her heart was soaring at the discovery that her fears were groundless. Olympia, who had thought to seduce Philip away from her, had not!

When she carried the tray back, Philip had his shoes back on, and seemed to have recovered his temper.

"I'd be grateful if you didn't repeat a word of this to Sir Leonard," he said seriously, as he sipped his tea. "I'd feel like an even bigger fool than I do already."

"Not a word," Jenny promised.

He eyed her attire. "You look as if you've only just come in yourself."

"No, I was just going out. I like to watch the dawn come up in the woods. You see such things in the early light—"

"I guess you must. It sounds fine. Let's go, then."

"But your feet?" she protested.

"They've walked this far. Another short trip won't hurt them." He put his arm around her shoulders, and they walked out into the early morning.

They climbed a stile and found themselves in a dewy meadow, where the first buttercups could just be seen. They could hear the chuckling of water hens by the banks of the stream. At the far side of the meadow another stile appeared between two banks of hawthorn, and suddenly

they were in a sunken lane that vanished altogether as they entered the wood.

When the stream came into sight, Jenny found a place by the bank where the opening in the trees gave them a clearer view of the sky. Then she crouched down on the ground, and pointed upward.

The sky was turning a faint gray, which became streaked with pink even as they looked. Now the dawn chorus was in full blast, and every twig, every dewy spider's web caught the light as the sun came up. Jenny held her breath with the magic of it, then slowly turned her head and their eyes met. Philip's were warm and ardent. Happiness flooded through her as he touched her cheek with gentle fingers.

"Jenny—" he said softly, "my Jenny."

Suddenly she was in his arms, her mouth upturned for his kiss. But instead of kissing her, he twined his fingers in her hair, pulling her head back to look down into her face. He searched her features for a long time, a strange smile playing about his mouth, before he finally dropped his head and seized her mouth with his own.

"Why did you stare at me like that?" she said when she could breathe again. "What were you looking for?"

"Never mind," he said. "It's enough that I found it."

She twined her arms around his neck and pulled his head down to hers, kissing him with all the force of her passionate young love. Surely now he would tell her what she longed to hear—that he loved her—that he wanted to marry her. She was aware of his desire as he molded her soft body to his with movements of his hands that were as demanding as they were tender. Her own desires welled up to meet him, flooding her with heated longing, leaving her desolate when he pulled away abruptly.

"We'd better be getting back," he said in a strained voice. "If Sir Leonard wakes

up and finds us both missing he's liable to think the worst."

OVER BREAKFAST Philip talked about his research of the previous day, which had apparently been satisfying. The house where his mother had been born was still standing, and a neighbor actually remembered the little Alice Rhynham bouncing with excitement because her parents were taking her to a new country. There were several Rhynhams in the churchyard, and the vicar had opened the parish records willingly.

The telephone rang, and Grandpa went to answer it. When he came back he glared at Philip.

"It's for you," he told him. As he seated himself he mouthed to Jenny, "It's the hussy."

In the background Jenny could hear Philip's voice. The curt tone was unmistakable. She wished Grandpa could hear it and take heed.

When he returned, Philip said, "If you're going to work this morning, Jenny, perhaps you could drop me at the riding stables?"

"Of course," she agreed. "I'll be leaving in half an hour."

The old man's blue eyes were on her, but she refused to meet them. She knew she would see in them a mixture of sympathy and condemnation for what he considered the poor-spirited way she was dealing with Olympia's threat.

On the journey to the village Philip said, "I suppose you can guess why she rang?"

"To apologize?"

"Well, it was sort of an apology. She wanted my word that I wouldn't tell anyone. I told her that you knew, but I said you wouldn't tell Sir Leonard. I shan't be seeing her again, so the subject will die a natural death."

When they reached the stables, Jenny said, "Shall I pick you up on the way home?"

"No, I'll get myself back. I don't know how long I'll be."

He gave her a brief kiss, and was gone. She sat still for a moment, feeling the touch of his firm lips on hers, longing to run after him, jump on horseback and ride with him to the ends of the earth. But perhaps he would not want her. Perhaps even now Olympia—

Stop that! she told herself sternly. He's explained about Olympia, and you believe him. Now go to work!

There was no sign of Olympia's car when she pulled up outside Dr. Whickham's cottage. She refused to speculate about why that might be, and marched inside, determined to concentrate on her work and nothing else. But it was easier said than done.

"You really are in a dream this morning, aren't you?" said Dr. Whickham at one point. "I've spent the last half hour telling you about my trip to America. The bulk of the research must be done in Massachusetts. But while I'm gone I shall still need you to work for me here—deal with the mail, phone me with anything urgent. And I'll send you lots of notes to type up."

At about three, he said gently, "Get off home now, child, and don't come back till you're more yourself."

She obeyed him gratefully. It was good to have the chance to be alone, to think her own thoughts. Once home, she tiptoed up the stairs, down the corridor. But as she reached Sir Leonard's bedroom door she was caught by the sound of voices. One of them belonged to her great-grandfather. The other one was Philip's.

Shock held her there. Then, from the murmur of voices, one stood out clearly. It was Sir Leonard, speaking in an aggressive tone.

"I just want to be quite sure that we both understand what we're saying."

"I see no cause to doubt it, sir," came Philip's milder voice. "I'll talk to Jenny

tonight. That's what we agreed on, isn't it?"

"Yes. Better get it done quick. I don't like these things hanging about."

Philip replied with a laugh, "It's scarcely hanging about, sir, to propose to a girl you haven't known a week."

"If things have been properly managed, a week's quite long enough," said Sir Leonard testily.

Jenny heard no more. She sped to her room on winged feet and flung herself on the bed, laughing and crying with joy. Philip wanted to marry her. He was going to ask her that evening. He'd even had the consideration to approach Sir Leonard first, knowing that was what he would consider proper.

She was in a fever of impatience, feeling her happiness so near, yet just beyond her grasp. She left her door ajar so that she could hear when Philip left her great-grandfather's room. But an hour passed, then two. And still the two men stayed in there talking. Now it was time to dress for dinner, and tonight she intended to look special. So she closed her door and went off to luxuriate in a bath.

When she descended the great staircase in the green velvet, Jenny knew she looked beautiful. No girl could be as happy as she was tonight without it casting a glow of loveliness over her. But, Philip did not come out to greet her, so she passed on to the library and found the two men there.

It was Sir Leonard who came toward her first. Looking up into his face she saw not the happiness she had expected, but weariness and strain. Her heart contracted. She knew what that look meant. Now the moment had come Sir Leonard was finding it hard to lose her. She clutched his arm, but he put her hand gently aside and leaned down to kiss her.

"Philip has something to say to you, my dear," he murmured, and left the library.

She was dismayed at Sir Leonard's manner of forcing the moment on them,

and guessed Philip felt the same. If she had not known what he was going to say, she might have thought he was angry with her, so strange was the look in his eyes.

"What did Grandpa mean by that?" she said.

He gave a brief, strained smile. "Need you ask? There's only one thing that's ever announced to a girl in that formal manner, isn't there? It has to be a proposal."

A chill crept over her at his manner. "I didn't think proposals were made like that anymore," she said.

"They are here, surely. In your world—in this house—nothing changes."

"And so you went to Grandpa first and asked his permission?" she said, trying to match his brittle manner.

"I suppose you could put it like that. He's all for our marriage. The question is—are you? I get the feeling that you're trying not to answer me."

"It isn't that—it's just—"

"It's just that plain Philip Thornhill doesn't appeal to you as a husband. Fine to dally with in the woods, but for marriage one wants a fine English gentleman, with a title and a few hundred years of ancestry. Sorry, Jenny, if you take me, you take just me."

"But that's all I want," she said. "Philip, I love you."

He was looking at her intently. "Do you, Jenny? Then will you marry me?"

"Oh, yes—yes, Philip."

His kiss was gentle, almost formal. But she guessed that he was inhibited by the knowledge that Sir Leonard was hovering not far from the open door. And sure enough, he appeared promptly.

"I have instructed Betterton to serve champagne," he announced.

In spite of herself, Jenny's lips twitched. "Suppose I'd refused him, Grandpa?" she said.

"Don't be ridiculous, child. There was never any question of that."

Her eyes misted suddenly. She knew the pain her marriage would cost him,

but his deep love for her would make him think only of her happiness.

The evening ended early when Sir Leonard discovered his need for an early night. He shook Philip's hand, kissed Jenny, and then he was gone.

"It's a fine night," Philip said. "Do you feel like a stroll?"

"I'll get my shawl," she said eagerly.

His arm was warm and strong around her shoulders as they walked across the grass.

"I won't keep you out long," he said, "but I can't talk to you in there. I'm afraid the old boy will come back to make sure I'm not making as big a mess of my courting as I did of my proposal."

She joined in his laughter, feeling her heart expand at the warmth that had returned to his voice.

"Philip, what happened to you?" she asked eagerly. "Why did you say all those dreadful things to me?"

"I thought you were going to refuse me. I thought being a Carrister of Carrister Hall was the most important thing in the world to you."

They had reached the trees now, and the branches blotted out the moonlight, so that she could hardly see him. There was only the gleam of his eyes in the darkness, and the warmth of him holding her close.

"Philip, you've been on my mind every moment since we met," she murmured before his mouth silenced her.

His kiss was like the one he had given her in the library the night they had mistaken each other for burglars, scorching and passionate, with an undertow of anger that she could not understand. But she couldn't think clearly. She was dizzy with the pressure of his body against hers, the intimate way his hands caressed her. Her shawl had fallen away and she felt the chill night breeze on her shoulders and arms, and the burning touch of his fingers on her bare skin. Then his mouth found a place in the hollow of her neck in a slow, seductive ex-

ploration that made her ache with the sensual intensity of her response. Every movement of his mouth told her of his possessive desire. She knew the mad racing of the pulse at her throat must be conveyance to him of her body's wild response to his lovemaking, and her longing that he should never stop.

He had drawn her down to the ground, and she lay cradled in his arms, trying to see his face. She ached with her love for him. He was arousing her with soft, sensuous touches till she could scarcely breathe. She felt herself melting into him, yearning for him to love her. Instinctively she followed every movement of his hands and body. She could sense that his desire for her was reaching the point where he would be past control. She began to tremble, longing for him, yet fearful.

"How did my little tomboy turn into such a seductive witch?" he murmured huskily against her mouth.

"Because she fell in love," she murmured. "Philip, I love you so. I only want to belong to you—"

As though she had triggered an explosion, she felt his arms tighten around her, and his hands begin a more intimate exploration. Every movement heightened her sensuous torment. The blood was pounding in her veins. She gasped with the piercing sweetness of anticipation.

But nothing happened. Her wrists were seized suddenly in Philip's steely fingers and pulled away from him. For a moment he held her pinned to the ground, his eyes blazing. Then he got to his feet and yanked her after him.

"No!" he burst out violently. "It isn't going to be this way for us." He gave her a little shake. "Not like this. Sir Leonard would never forgive me if I harmed you."

"No—" she agreed in a desolate voice, although she could not have said what she was agreeing to. Something was wrong, though; all her instincts told her that.

"Let's go back, Jenny," Philip said in a quiet, firm voice, "while I still have command of myself." He touched her wet cheek with gentle fingers. "When we love each other, it's going to be perfect, honey."

He put his arm around her and they walked back to the house, her head on his shoulder. They did not speak, and the silence let through the voices that Jenny would have preferred not to hear. They told her that on this night of her happiness, something was very wrong.

*

SHE WAS awakened by the telephone's insistent ringing downstairs. The clock said 4:00 a.m. She scrambled into a dressing gown and stumbled, bleary-eyed, to the hall.

As soon as she heard the young, female voice, Jenny was alert. The girl had an American accent. She sounded tearful, and she asked urgently to speak to Philip Thornhill.

Philip, too, had been roused by the telephone. He was standing in his doorway when she dashed back upstairs.

"It's for you," she said. "A girl with an accent like yours."

"One of my sisters," he said at once.

When he had finished, Philip came up the stairs and put his arms around her, resting his head on her shoulder with an air of weary desperation.

"My mother's been in a car crash," he said. "I have to get back there as quick as I can."

"Oh, Philip, I'm so sorry. Is she very bad?"

"Yes, it's very serious. I'm sorry to leave you now, honey—"

"Don't say that," she said urgently. "We can wait as long as we have to. I'll still be here when she's better."

"Bless you for that 'when,'" he said, trying to smile. "Could you call the airline for me? I'll start packing."

THE UNHAPPIEST week of Jenny's life passed. She missed Philip desperately. In those few short days of his stay he had transformed her existence. The Hall now seemed bleak and empty. It was a dreadful foretaste of what her life would be if she were ever to lose him.

Philip's calls helped her very little. His mother had held her own, but her condition was still critical. His voice sounded curt and remote whenever they talked, but this she put down to strain.

In the second week she returned home from a day's work with Dr. Whickham to find an unfamiliar car by the steps. Her heart soared. Philip had arrived back unexpectedly! But then the door opened and Mr. Trask, Sir Leonard's solicitor, came down the steps. She greeted him briefly and chatted for a moment, but did not linger.

"I wanted to make some small alterations in my will," Sir Leonard told her when she found him in the library.

She looked at him with shocked eyes, realizing how old he was, and how worn he had come to look in this last week. Terror rose in her, as though the mention of a will was an ill omen, and she spoke sharply to him.

"What the devil do you want to make a fuss about that for?" she snapped. "You're going to live to a hundred, so stop trying to frighten me."

He raised bewildered eyes to hers, and the next moment she was on her knees beside his chair, clasping him in her arms in a passion of tears and contrition.

"There, there, child." He patted her head. "He'll be back soon, never fear."

"No, it's *you*," she sobbed. "You mustn't talk about dying."

"I never mentioned dying," he declared robustly. "I have changed my will in view of your coming marriage."

She gave a watery chuckle and sat back on her heels. "That's a bit premature, isn't it?" she said. "Suppose something happens and we don't marry."

He looked down into her upturned face, streaked with tears. "Everything will be all right. Leave it to your old grandpa."

THESE DAYS she looked forward to going to Dr. Whickham. There were not the same memories of Philip to torment her as there were in the Hall. Olympia had returned to London, and Dr. Whickham was taken up with plans for his trip to America. Jenny dreaded his coming departure. Her already small world was contracting dismally. And one afternoon, it contracted further.

She was in the kitchen making coffee when the phone rang. After a moment Dr. Whickham came to the door. "Betterton's on the phone, Jenny. Something's happened to Sir Leonard."

She snatched up the receiver. Betterton sounded as though he was in tears.

"You'd better get here quick, Miss. We found him lying on the library floor. We can't wake him, and he's that funny a color. I've called the doctor."

She broke every speed limit getting home. Dr. Whitby had arrived before her. He came out to her in the hall, and patted her arm kindly.

"I've sent for the ambulance, my dear, but he's had a massive heart attack, and at his time of life there isn't much hope. You'd better get in there quickly."

In a moment she was on her knees beside the big leather sofa where he lay. His face was blue and his breath made an ugly sound.

"Grandpa—Grandpa, please—" Tears poured unchecked down her face.

He opened his eyes, and the ghost of a smile lit his craggy features. "Hallo, darling," he whispered. "I'm glad you got here—"

The unspoken words "in time" hovered in the air between them. Wildly Jenny rejected them.

"The ambulance will be here any moment . . ." She faltered, but he lifted his hand in a faint motion to silence her.

"Not now, darling," he said raggedly, his words ending in a gasp of pain. His eyes closed again, and stayed closed for a long time, but he had taken hold of her hand and did not release it.

Jenny looked up as Betterton came in.

"How did it happen?" she whispered.

Betterton's cheeks were wet. "It was that Esterby, Miss—" he managed to say.

"Jack Esterby came here?"

"Yes, Miss. I couldn't stop him. Sir Leonard saw him arrive. He said he'd talk to him. They came in here. About half an hour later Esterby left, and I heard a noise from in here. I found Sir Leonard lying on the floor."

So Jack Esterby had killed her great-grandfather. To Jenny that was the simple truth. Even as she muttered his name, Sir Leonard opened his eyes and tried to speak.

"Esterby—" he whispered. "Esterby—Philip . . ." His voice trailed away.

A chill of fear was creeping over her. "What did Esterby say about Philip?" she asked in a shaking voice.

"He promised to take care of everything—" the old man murmured "—when I'm not there." He opened his eyes and looked straight at her. "I'm sorry, darling," he whispered. "I should have thought of this. Should have told you before—" he drew a rasping gulp of air "—wanted to—but Philip said—" again there was that painful gasp "—forgive me—"

"You can't have done anything that I need to forgive," she cried passionately.

"Forgive me—" The eyes that held hers were full of desperate pleading. It restored her self-control.

"Yes," she said in a firm voice. "Whatever it is—I'll understand—and forgive."

His eyes softened with gratitude, and for the first time his face relaxed and became peaceful. She knew what was coming, and dropped her head as a wail burst from her throat.

"No—" she cried through her sobs, "no—"

The old man raised his free hand and began to stroke her hair, trying to comfort her. But after a few moments she felt the hand grow heavy and still.

IT WAS ALMOST dark when Mr. Trask knocked on the door of Carrister Hall two days later. Jenny opened to him, and the sight of her face gave him an odd turn. He had feared to find himself obligated to comfort a girl in tears. But tears might have been preferable to this harsh, despairing intensity. He knew that what he had to tell her would add to her despair, and he gave an inward shudder.

"Thank you for seeing me at a moment's notice," he said as he followed her into the library. "I only got back this afternoon, otherwise I'd have been in touch before."

While he offered condolences she took his coat, pointed him to a chair and brought him some coffee. There was an unnatural calm about her manner.

"I'd have wanted to see you even if you hadn't called," she said. "I want to know if there's anything I can do about Jack Esterby. He killed Grandpa, you know."

"I heard what happened. The Bettertons have been talking fairly freely about Esterby's visit and this place has become too hot to hold him, I'm glad to say. He decided to take an impromptu holiday. But if you mean, do you have any legal redress against him, the answer is no."

"I thought that was what you would say. But Esterby hounded Grandpa to death. He murdered him as surely as if he'd shot him."

"Jenny, I beg you, don't go about saying that kind of thing. Esterby could sue you for slander."

She sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "Yes, he'd love the chance, wouldn't he?" she agreed. "Then I'd have to sell this house to pay the costs.

Don't worry. I'm not going to make it that easy for him."

An uncomfortable look passed across the lawyer's face.

"Jenny—I must come to what I wanted to say to you. I suppose Sir Leonard died before he had the chance to tell you—"

She looked up. "Before he died he kept alluding to something he should have told me. Do you mean you know?"

"Yes, I do. The fact is, Sir Leonard didn't leave Carrister Hall to you. He left it to Philip Thornhill."

She didn't react as he had expected. A faraway look came into her eyes and when she spoke, it was in a musing tone.

"So that's what he meant," she said vaguely. "That day you came here, he told me he'd changed his will because of my coming marriage. I should have remembered Grandpa was dreadfully old-fashioned. To him it would be only proper that the property should be in the husband's name. It doesn't make any real difference."

"Forgive me, my dear. I've failed to make my meaning clear. The bequest is not conditional on Thornhill's marriage to you. Carrister Hall and the land surrounding it have been left to Philip Thornhill *as of right*. It's his to dispose of as he pleases. He could put you out of here tomorrow without a penny to your name."

For a long moment she stared at him. Then she gave a short, hard laugh.

"That's impossible," she said. "Grandpa would never have done that to me."

"I'm afraid he has. You must remember that he never expected to die so soon. He thought the will would only come into effect when you were already Philip Thornhill's wife. I tried to point out this possible situation to him, but you know how he was. My advice to you," Mr. Trask went on, "is that your marriage should go through as quickly as possible, to secure your position."

"Are you suggesting that I should marry Philip for his money?" she said.

"In a word, yes. I have no doubt that your grandfather's intentions were of the best, but he has left you in a dreadfully exposed position."

"There's something I don't understand," she said at last. "You said earlier that Grandpa left the house to Philip *as of right*. But you also said he didn't mention the marriage in the will. What possible right can Philip have had to Carrister Hall if not through me?"

"You really have no idea?" Trask fumbled in his bag. "I think you'd better have a look at the will," he said. "It's there at the end."

...to my great-nephew, Philip Thornhill, grandson of my brother, George Carrister, known as George Thornhill at the end of his life...

"But—that's impossible—" Jenny said. "George died in France, waiting for his court-martial."

"It appears that he did not," Mr. Trask disagreed gently. "Your great-grandfather told me that when his father died in 1936, he inherited the title. It was only then that he learned from his mother that his brother had been alive all those years. He had escaped to America and adopted the surname of Thornhill, which was his mother's maiden name. George and his mother corresponded regularly, but she kept this a secret for fear of her husband's wrath. But when Sir Henry died, Lady Carrister felt free to speak, although only to her other son."

"Perhaps she hoped that George would return now that his father was dead. But he wrote to say he was doing very well in America. As far as the English authorities were concerned, he preferred to remain officially dead. He wrote to his brother, Leonard, telling him that he might assume the title and take the inheritance with an easy mind. He also promised never to return to 'upset the apple cart.' I do not recall any other details of the letter."

'She looked at him sharply. "You mean, you've seen the letter?"'

"Oh, yes, Sir Leonard showed it to me. He wanted to establish that although his action might be illegal, it had been performed with his brother's knowledge and consent. Actually, only his assumption of the title was illegal. Since there was no entail his father had left him the property, so it would still have been his, even if George had shown up."

"But the title had to go to the eldest son—which was still George?"

"Exactly. Sir Leonard assured me that he had already spoken to Philip Thornhill. He not only recognized him as George's grandson, but gave him the means to prove it. He also intended to make a more public disclosure when Thornhill returned from America.

"But why didn't he tell *me*?" Jenny demanded. "And what means had he given Philip?"

"Lady Carrister kept all her son's letters from America, as did Sir Leonard. Those letters establish beyond any doubt that George Carrister and George Thornhill of Boston are one and the same man. Also, I gather Thornhill told your great-grandfather that the letters from this end are still in the family's possession in Boston. The entire correspondence fitted together ought to convince anyone."

"In other words," said Jenny in a hard voice, "when Philip arrived here, he knew that all he had to do was persuade Grandpa to hand the letters over."

"Exactly. How he induced him to do so I do not know—"

"Oh, I think I can guess that." Jenny's voice was bitter. "But it's not important. So Philip has the letters now."

"All except the one to Sir Leonard telling him to take the title, with George's blessing. He retained it."

There was a long silence while Jenny stared into the fire.

"Tell me," she said at last, "do you still advise me to marry this man without delay?"

Mr. Trask hesitated. "I must be honest with you," he answered. "I should not want to see any daughter of mine married to a man who has behaved as Philip Thornhill has. But," he added heavily, "if you want to regain Carrister Hall, I see no other way for you to do it. Jenny, you have nothing, absolutely nothing. Sir Leonard's income came from three sources—an annuity, his pension, and the income from a few thousand pounds that he had invested. The first two died with him, and the last he left to the Bettertons. Only his personal effects come to you. It is plain that he trusted Philip Thornhill absolutely."

"Yes," she said softly, "we all did."

When the lawyer had gone she sat for a long time, staring into the fire. She had no desire to cry. That would come later. At the moment she was capable only of faint surprise at how easily she had been tricked by a plausible rogue.

It was an effort to go upstairs and enter her great-grandfather's room, but she was driven by demons now. It was worse when she switched on the light. She could see his slippers neatly arranged side by side as though waiting for him to come and put them on. On his dressing table stood his pipe, and the steel-rimmed glasses that he wore for reading.

His desk was locked, but she found the key on his key ring, and opened it. She could see nothing that looked like a letter, so passed on to the drawers. Only one was locked, and this opened to the same key. Inside was a black-backed book. A diary! Grandpa was a Victorian.

She began to flick over the pages until she found the entry for Monday, April 25th, the day Philip had arrived. What she read made her mouth drop open.

"Today George's grandson came to Carrister Hall. His name is Philip Thornhill and I knew him at once."

Jenny read this passage again and again. Grandpa had known Philip's identity from the beginning. But he had never spoken out even to her.

For the day of Philip's proposal, Friday, April 29th (Evening), she read:

"Thornhill came to my room this afternoon and told me he was George's grandson. I showed him George's letters, and I could tell he was eager to possess them. There is no mystery about why he should want them. With these letters he can prove his identity."

Jenny threw the diary down, with a gesture of disgust. What did it matter anyway? Whatever might have been between Philip and herself was over. Nothing would change that. She could feel herself hardening inside, and was glad of it. She could not afford to be soft and gentle now. She would need all her strength.

Two documents had fallen out of the diary. One was Grandpa's birth certificate. The other was a letter, postmarked Boston, 1936, addressed to Sir Leonard Carrister at Carrister Hall.

Eagerly Jenny read it. She was struck by the note of affection that came up from the faded pages. George Carrister had still been fond of the brother he hadn't seen for nearly twenty years.

"...nothing to make me want to come back to England. Mother says the old man's left the place to you. Jolly good. I've no complaints about that. And I've got a nice little business of my own over here. Alice wouldn't like to leave her own country, I'm sure... Then there's our son. Young George is settled in at school and I wouldn't like to move him. So you take the lot, old boy, with my blessing.

"That goes for the title, too... let sleeping dogs lie, that's what I say..."

There he was, George Carrister, her great-great uncle. And Philip, she realized, was her second cousin once re-

moved. He was also lord of the manor, by descent, and now by right of inheritance. Soon he would know it.

She refused to let her mind dwell on thoughts of whether Philip had really loved her. It simply did not matter. Philip had connived with Jack Esterby, and Jack Esterby had killed Grandpa.

Downstairs she could hear the phone begin to ring. She knew it would be Philip, but Jenny did not move. She had nothing left to say to Philip Thornhill. After a long time, the ringing stopped.

*

"YOU DON'T KNOW what it means to me, your delaying the funeral as you've done so that I could attend." General Waters spoke from the depths of the hotel arm-chair.

Jenny looked at him fondly. He was in his eighties and reminded her heart-breakingly of Grandpa.

"I know it's what he'd have wanted me to do," she said. "You were his oldest and dearest friend."

They were sitting in the coffee lounge of the Carrister Arms, the village's one hotel worthy of the name. It was the evening before the funeral.

"It was kind of you to invite me to stay at the Hall, but I know you'll understand that I feel a bit more at ease in the village. I expect you're all at sixes and sevens out there now, aren't you?"

"Well, the Bettertons have been packing up to leave," she said. "They've got their hearts set on a little bungalow by the sea, and they can afford it now. I've been getting Grandpa's things together to take with me."

The old man gave her a shrewd look.

"Rum way things have been left," he said. "This Thornhill—will he be at the funeral?"

"No. He's still in America."

"Sooner you get him over here to marry you the better, I say."

"There isn't going to be any marriage," she asserted quietly.

"But—m'dear girl, Sir Leonard only left him the place for your sake. Without you he's not entitled to it."

"Yes, he is. He's the only male heir left in the family."

"Well, what use is that if he's called Thornhill?" said the General shrewdly. "And don't judge him harshly just because he didn't come clean in the beginning. He may have had good reasons. Let him at least tell you what they were."

"I don't care what they were," Jenny said. "He gave Grandpa a bad time, and that's enough for me." She would not say more. Her suspicions about Philip's connections with Esterby must be kept to herself, and her fear that his courtship had been all part of the grand plan to get the Hall.

JENNY HAD DREAMED of her wedding in the village church. She had thought she would walk down the aisle to her beloved Philip on Sir Leonard's arm. Now she followed his coffin with a heart full of bitterness.

The church was packed. Everyone in the village had known Sir Leonard, and most had liked and respected him. Every seat was taken, and people spilled out through the doors into the sunlight.

The worst moments came outside, by the open grave. Jenny could not look as the coffin was lowered into the ground, and she turned away quickly so as not to hear the earth falling and know that the very end had come. She found herself leaning on Dr. Whickham's arm. He was leading her toward the gate when she raised her head and saw Philip Thornhill.

The shock was so violent that for a moment she thought she would faint. Philip was standing directly in her path, his eyes fixed on her with a cold, watchful stare that made her shiver.

Dr. Whickham spoke first. "My dear Philip, I'm so glad you could make it."

Philip shook hands with him. "Thank you, sir. I almost didn't get here. There were—difficulties placed in my way." His eyes raked Jenny as he spoke.

"And your mother?" Dr. Whickham asked.

"My mother is mending, thank you."

"Good, good." Dr. Whickham ran out of inspiration.

"Perhaps, Jenny, you'd let me drive to the Hall with you?" Philip's voice was calm, but she detected freezing shoals and currents beneath it.

"I ought to stay here awhile—" she began.

Cruel fingers gripped her arm. "You will return to Carrister Hall with me now, Jenny. The things we have to say to each other won't wait."

"There's nothing I want to say to you."

"But there's a great deal you're going to say. I'm entitled to some explanations from you."

"You've got a nerve demanding explanations of *me*," she snapped. "I rather think it's the other way around."

"I could have told you whatever you wanted to know—if I could have spoken to you. But suddenly nobody answers the phone, or Betterton does and claims you're not there. I leave a message but you don't call me back. Then I get a lawyer's letter, and that gives me some clue as to why you're sulking—"

"Sulking—?" She turned and began to walk toward the car, her head held high.

"What about the Bettertons?" he asked when they reached it.

"They're not coming back till later."

"Good. We can have this out in privacy."

She covered the ten miles in silence, her mind seething. When she drew up outside the Hall, Philip took his cases from the back. Plainly he had come to stay awhile. She hurried up the steps and opened the door. Inside, she turned instinctively to the library, pulling off her black hat and letting her red brown curls

fall freely. Then Philip was standing beside her.

For a moment she caught a look on his face that brought back the other Philip, the man she had believed him to be, and she had to stop herself from crying out. At once Philip's arms were around her.

"Jenny, I'm sorry. I know what you must have been through this last week. But what I really minded was that you shut me out when I'd have liked to comfort you. Jenny—Jenny—"

His lips were in her hair, on her wet face. She was crushed against him, and against her will she felt herself beginning to respond. Her arms found their way around him, seeking the animal comfort of nestling against him. Even her senses, so long deprived of his touch, were in a joyful riot at the feel of his lips on her flesh. Blindly she raised her face, streaming with tears, and felt him kiss her eyelids, then her cheeks, and then at last her mouth. She gave herself completely to his kiss, because she knew she would never love another man as much as this one whom she was about to leave forever.

"Honey, you mustn't blame me for the way things were left," he whispered. "I knew nothing about it. You must believe me."

The glib ease with which he uttered words she knew to be a lie brought her to her senses. She removed his arms and turned away to stare into the empty fireplace.

"Don't plead ignorance, please, Philip," she said in a choking voice. "You've lied and deceived me from the start. You could have told me who you were and why you were here."

"And just why do you think I was here, Jenny?"

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it?" she answered wearily. "'To claim your rights.'"

"Rubbish!" he said furiously. "I never intended to claim anything, and that's why I didn't say who I was. I didn't even know the Hall was still standing, and I

was pretty sure there wouldn't be any family members there.

"Jenny, I was fifteen when I first heard my grandfather tell the story of his escape. I wanted to see the place where it had all started, where his family—my family—had lived. I wanted to see if it looked the way I'd always imagined. But that was all. I never thought of anything else."

"Then I bumped into you, and I realized I had problems, especially as Sir Leonard was still alive.

"I decided to keep quiet because I knew if I said who I was you'd jump to exactly the conclusion that you did. Sir Leonard would assume I'd come to threaten him, and he'd get worried. I just wanted to look around and then go."

"Only he recognized you the moment he set eyes on you," she said bitterly.

"But I didn't know that. He never said."

She looked at him with a stony face. "You're very plausible, Philip. Nobody would guess that you'd made a cold-blooded bargain with Grandpa—to marry me for the letters that proved your identity."

He went white. "Oh, Lord, what do you know about that?" he said.

She felt as though she'd been punched in the stomach. Philip had admitted that their marriage was part of a trade-off. "You don't deny that there was a bargain, then?"

"No. How can I? You obviously know about it. But it wasn't the way you think. He wanted that bargain, not me. I wanted to marry you anyway—"

"Don't lie to me, Philip!"

"I won't take that even from you," he said harshly.

"Does the truth about yourself hurt?" she taunted him, a wild note creeping into her voice.

"Jenny, be quiet, for God's sake, before you say things I can't forgive!"

"I don't care what you forgive, or don't forgive," she said bitterly. "After

today I don't want to set eyes on you again. I'm glad now that you came, because it gives me the chance to tell you what I think of a creature like you, who'd pretend to a love he doesn't feel because he thinks he can gain something, who'd lie and cheat and frighten an old man into his grave—"

"Jenny, I'm warning you—" the words came out through tight lips—"I'll put up with a lot, but now you've gone too far. I had nothing to do with his death."

"You had everything to do with it," she cried through her sobs. "You and Jack Esterby between you."

"What the—?"

"You thought I didn't know about the filthy deal you made, didn't you? That day he came here, you sent me indoors so that I couldn't hear what you said to him. But Esterby couldn't keep quiet. He came here and told Grandpa you'd promised him that you'd 'take care of matters' when he was dead. And that's what killed Grandpa, because he suddenly saw the way you'd tricked and cheated him. *You killed him!*"

She had not meant to utter the final, dreadful words, but they had burst out of her misery before she could stop them. As soon as they were uttered they seemed to hang in the air between them, as solid and impenetrable as a brick wall. She knew at once that she had created a barrier between them that might never be crossed.

When the silence became agonizing, he spoke. "If you think that, there is nothing more to be said. But I will add something, Jenny. And I mean every word of it. *Get out of my house!* I never wish to set eyes on you again."

She could not bear the dreadful look in those dark eyes that had once gazed on her with what she thought was love. She turned and fled from him.

THE FIRST THING Jenny saw when she pushed back her bedroom curtains was

the sun gleaming on the sea. The Bettertons had chosen their coastal bungalow for its marvelous sea views, and she stood entranced.

It seemed like a hundred years since she had left Carrister Hall. She had stayed in Dr. Whickham's cottage that night, and the following day the two of them traveled to London to start work. But she had been little help to him. Almost immediately she felt feverish and wretched. What started as flu had become pneumonia, and one day she awoke in the hospital.

One day Dr. Whickham had brought her a letter from the Bettertons, telling her about the bungalow they had rented in Cornwall, hoping she would find time to visit them soon.

"There's no time like the present," Dr. Whickham had said. "Sea air is just what you need."

Despite her protests he had contacted the Bettertons, who had been delighted at the prospect of nursing her through her convalescence. When she was well enough for the journey he had traveled down with her, then returned to London.

Dr. Whickham had proved himself a staunch friend. Her job was still there for her whenever she was well enough. Every week the post brought a salary check that Jenny would have thought overgenerous even if she had been doing any work. But when she telephoned him and protested, he threatened to put the receiver down. She was left in tears at her friend's fatterly goodness.

Then, quite by chance, she discovered that he was paying the Bettertons for her board and lodging, while giving them strict instructions not to tell her. This turning of the wheel full circle gave Jenny the first laugh she had had in weeks, albeit a wry one.

After three weeks she had a good color, and her strength was growing daily. She was on the point of phoning Dr. Whickham to say that she was returning to work

when the letter arrived with an accompanying note from Mr. Trask to say that it had come to his office, with a request that it be forwarded.

Jenny had believed her feelings to be under control, but when she saw Philip's writing she discovered that they were not.

Jenny,

Now I've had time to think about it, I know how much it must hurt you to think I cheated and terrorized Sir Leonard, and that by doing so I contributed to his death. I can't see you anymore as the sweet girl I knew, but I remember that girl too well to want you to be needlessly hurt. So I've decided to tell you exactly what happened, and then we need never trouble each other again.

My reason for coming to Carrister Hall was exactly what I told you—curiosity about my family.

I didn't tell either of you who I was because I didn't want to bother you. Sir Leonard was an old man and I didn't know how he'd stand up to the shock. It never occurred to me that he'd recognize me and spend days brooding about it without telling anyone. I planned to spend a couple of days there and then move on. If I hadn't fallen in love with you, you'd never have heard of me again....

Then, on Friday afternoon, Sir Leonard sprang his surprise on me. I got back to the house to find a message that he wanted to see me. I went to his room and he told me he knew who I was. He said he had letters that proved my identity, so that I could 'take my rightful place' as the Carrister heir.

I told him I wasn't trying to take away anything that was his. The land and house belonged to him legally. The title was a bit more awkward. I tried to explain that I didn't really care about it, but I could tell he didn't believe me.

His chief concern was you. He didn't want my appearance on the scene to de-

prive you of your home. He offered me a bargain. I was to marry you. He was to give me the letters and recognize me as his great-nephew. I told him I wanted to marry you anyway, because I loved you, but it was plain that he wasn't convinced by this, either. You'd said that it was his dream to find a male heir and arrange your marriage to him. He thought his dream had come true. He didn't want to believe that I'd have married you anyway, because that would have spoilt it for him.

So I played along. I struck the bargain that he wanted to strike, and he was happy. But I never asked Sir Leonard to change his will in my favor. That was his idea. I thought he meant to wait until we were married, or at least make it conditional on our marriage. I never thought of him doing the crazy thing he did. That was what I meant when I said I knew nothing about it. When I got that lawyer's letter, I was horrified. I tried to call you and explain—I wanted to tell you I'd give it back to you as a wedding present. But you wouldn't speak to me on the phone.

One thing you must understand. Sir Leonard wasn't "terrorized" by my appearance. He was delighted. In his own way he'd really loved his brother, and I doubt anything could have made him happier than having the family reunited in this way. What scared him was the thought of what would happen to you when he was dead. You say I killed Sir Leonard. I say he died happier because he knew there was someone to protect you from Jack Esterby.

I don't know how you got the idea that I made some sort of deal with Esterby. I only saw him once the day he came to Carrister Hall. After you'd gone I gave him a black eye, and told him I'd blacken the other one if he ever came around again. I made you go inside because if there were any witnesses he might try to bring a charge of assault against me. I didn't want to see you in the witness box.

I never meant to dispossess you of your home. I wanted us to share it. I was working on a plan to spend the next couple of years based in England working up the English side of the business so that we could all live in the house together. Now, I would like to be able to return Carrister Hall to you, but I don't dare. You would lose it in taxes in no time. I can defend it more strongly than you, and I intend to do so.

But you will not be poorer because of me. I had the Hall valued, and when you contact Mr. Trask, he will tell you that a sum of money has been deposited with him, for you. It is no compensation for what you have lost. It is simply your right.

It is almost dawn. I seem to have been writing all night, but I haven't managed to say the things I really wanted to. And now I must try to find the right words to say good-bye to you.

I never meant you any harm, Jenny. I wanted only to love you and live with you all my life. I wanted to have children with you, and grow old with you. But we are both Carristers, and we both have too much of the family pride to forgive and forget. It is too late for what we might have had. So let us remember only the best.

Good-bye, and God bless you,
Philip

JENNY SAT staring at the letter for a long time when she had finished it. She did not need to read it a second time to know that it contained the truth. A heavy weight had settled where her heart should be.

There was a knock on her bedroom door, and Mrs. Betterton's head came around.

"Are you all right?" she said. "You went off a bit quiet, like."

"I'm all right," said Jenny wanly. "Come in. I want to tell you something."

She found she needed to talk about Philip, and it was only right that Mrs. Betterton should not think the worst of him. She talked about Jack Esterby and her unfounded suspicions, and discovered that another shock was in store.

"I don't see how you could have thought that," said Mrs. Betterton. "He couldn't have teamed up with that Esterby, not after the way he knocked him down."

"Knocked him—? Do you mean you knew about that?"

"Why surely. I was out in the yard with the chickens. I heard a lot of shouting so I came to have a look. I kept out of sight, but got there in time to see Esterby go flying back down the steps. He picked himself up. He was rubbing his face and shouting. And Mr. Thornhill just said to take himself off or he'd do it again. I didn't like Jack Esterby but I almost felt sorry for him. Mr. Thornhill looked all meek and quiet, but those who got on his wrong side always ended up wishing they hadn't. I noticed that."

"And you never told anyone that you'd seen this?"

"Well, nobody asked me about it. You mean Mr. Thornhill never told you himself?"

"No. There're a lot of things he never told me. I thought he went and frightened the wits out of Grandpa, but he says here that Grandpa sent for him and insisted on talking."

"That would be that Friday." Mrs. Betterton nodded.

"Good grief! Don't tell me you knew about that, too?"

"I should think the whole world knew about it, what with Sir Leonard sending for Betterton or me every five minutes. 'Has Mr. Thornhill come in yet?' 'Well, when he does come in send him up at once.' He nagged on and on, till I lost count of the number of times I climbed them stairs to tell him the same thing. In the end he came home, thank the Lord. Now what are you laughing at? My God,

girl, you sound hysterical. You want to snap out of that, quick."

"Yes, it's all right," Jenny said, bringing herself under control. "And it isn't funny at all, really. I think I'll go out for a good long walk. I need it."

*

"OH, IT WILL BE GOOD to get back to England." Jenny leaned back in her chair and sighed. "Not that I haven't loved America, but I'm getting homesick."

"Yes, I shall enjoy seeing my home again," agreed Dr. Whickham. "Three months is long enough to be away."

They were sitting at dinner in the restaurant of their hotel. Dr. Whickham had celebrated the completion of their work by ordering the best wine in the place, and was refilling Jenny's glass.

"You must be eager to get down to the writing," she said.

"Well, you know, my dear, I have the oddest feeling that I've written it fifty times already. I've explained myself to so many journalists. And don't I remember your saying something about another interview?" said Dr. Whickham. "I don't see how there'll be time if we're leaving tomorrow."

"It wasn't definite. The press office of the radio station where we were yesterday called me this morning to say a journalist named Jeff Turner had been on to them. They thought he'd be contacting us himself, but I've heard nothing. He probably changed his mind."

"Ah, well, perhaps I've done enough of that sort of thing." He refilled his glass. "How did you come to book us into this hotel?" he asked.

"Well, we needed somewhere near the Boston airport. Why? Don't you like it?"

"I think it's a charming little place. I just wondered if it was part of the Thornhill chain."

"No, it isn't," Jenny said quickly. "I always check. I don't want to run into him."

"I wonder if that's really true."

"Yes, it really is."

It was still painful for her to think of the letter she had written in reply to Philip's. It had begun as formally as his own, thanking him for the money he had sent to Mr. Trask—far more than she believed the house was worth—but telling him why she could never touch it. But as she went on, it had developed into a passionate plea for his understanding and forgiveness for the cruel accusations she had hurled at him.

But Philip had never replied. Days had passed into weeks. She had known the heartsickness of hope deferred indefinitely. Finally hope had died.

They finished the meal and went to the outside bar where they could enjoy the warmth of a fine September evening. After a few minutes a woman emerged, supported by a man on either side. She walked slowly, with the aid of a stick. She had iron gray hair and a beautiful face that looked as if it might recently have been drawn with suffering.

She chose a seat near Jenny and settled there calmly while her two courtiers busied themselves making her comfortable. They left her alone at last, with a drink in her hand, and her stick within easy reach. But after a moment she tried to alter the stick's position and it slithered to the ground.

Jenny rose at once to restore it to its owner.

"Thank you so much." The woman smiled. "I do so dislike being helpless. Here's to it not lasting much longer." She raised her glass.

She had a soft voice, with a distinct trace of an English accent. Perhaps that accounted for Jenny's impression of having met her somewhere before.

"You've been ill?" asked Jenny.

"Yes, I had this car smash a few months back, and I've been a pain in the neck to all my relatives ever since."

Jenny's heart began to thump. Suddenly she knew why this woman seemed

so familiar, and she desperately wished she'd never started the conversation. Yet she was compelled to say, "I'm sure none of your relatives has ever called you a pain in the neck."

"Well, they ought to have," said the woman. "I don't know how they've put up with me. But they've all been marvelous, especially my son, Philip. He didn't even blame me for his broken engagement, and it was all my fault."

"I daresay he'd have told you if he felt badly about it," Jenny said quietly.

"Oh, he felt bad all right. I've never seen him so uptight."

"It's getting late," Jenny said, setting down her glass. "I've enjoyed meeting you, but it's time I went to bed."

"Well, that's a pity," the older woman stated. "From what Philip told me about you, Jenny, I'd expected you to have more courage."

Jenny stared at her for a long moment. Out of the corner of her eye she was aware of Dr. Whickham getting up and quietly disappearing. Her head was in a whirl.

"How did you know?" she said at last. "I can't have given myself away."

"Well, to be honest, this meeting isn't in any way an accident. I have a journalist friend who's good at finding things out."

"He wouldn't be called Jeff Turner, would he?"

"That's him. I was afraid they'd ring and tell you he'd called, so I hurried to book in here quickly, so that I could contrive a meeting, and we could have a good long chat. When I got here I asked someone to point you out to me."

"Philip isn't here, is he?" Jenny wanted to know, feeling suddenly suspicious. "Because if he is, I must go away. You must see that I can't meet him?"

"He isn't here. But do you hate him so much?"

"It's he who hates me," Jenny said huskily. "I wrote asking his forgiveness, but he never answered."

"Perhaps he never saw the letter," Mrs. Thornhill suggested.

"I sent it to Boston. He'd be bound to get it eventually. But how much did he tell you about what happened between us?"

"Not very much. That's his way, I'm afraid. Even as a child, if something hurt him, he was too proud to admit it. He'd hide the hurt away inside, and people would think he was unfeeling, when the reverse was true. I should like to know how it came about, if you could bear to tell me."

With a sense of relief Jenny told the whole story. She concluded by saying, "I did a dreadful thing refusing to answer the phone that week, and then accusing Philip of being responsible for Grandpa's death. I can't blame him for wanting nothing more to do with me."

"My dear, your behavior was both unkind and foolish. But then, so was his. And with far less excuse. What you both have to do now is forget that streak of stubborn Carrister pride and learn how to forgive each other. Now, is there any message you'd like me to give to Philip?"

"No, none. In fact, I'd much rather you didn't tell him you'd met me—"

"That won't be necessary," a voice spoke up by her elbow. She whirled to find herself looking into Philip's eyes.

The confusion of feelings that chased each other left her stunned. Out of them all, one emerged—a deep, wordless joy at the sight of him, the sensation of his nearness. He was thinner than she remembered, and his eyes had a wariness that had not been there before. But he was still Philip, still her love. Just to look at him made her pulses race in the old, remembered way, and her heart yearned toward him.

But as she stood looking at him, everything that had passed between them at their last meeting seemed to hang in the air, and she felt her joy evaporate.

"I was given an assurance that you weren't around," Jenny said, throwing a reproachful look at Mrs. Thornhill.

"I said he wasn't here," she agreed. "But I didn't say he wasn't *going* to be. Sometimes it is permissible to bend the truth a little."

"You're incorrigible," said Philip, looking down at his mother warmly. "When will you stop trying to arrange people's lives for them?"

"When they start doing a better job of it themselves," Mrs. Thornhill said dryly.

"Neither Jenny nor I have any complaints about the way things have been left," Philip said, looking Jenny straight in the eye. "We've each of us explained our position, but explanations after the event don't really help—do they, Jenny?"

Now she had her answer. Philip was telling her that her apology had not been accepted.

"No, some things happen too late," she agreed quietly. "And I really must go now, if you don't mind. Good night, Mrs. Thornhill."

"Can I buy you a drink before you go?" Philip asked.

The urge to say yes was overwhelming, but she fought the temptation.

"Thank you, Philip, but I really can't stay," she said brightly, and flashed him a smile of good-bye, making for the door that led back inside.

But once in her room, her mind insisted on going over the likely conversation that Philip would have with his mother when she had left. Mrs. Thornhill would urge him to put his pride aside, and Philip would recognize that there need be no barriers between them anymore. Then he would come running up the stairs to knock on her door, and then— She was still listening for him when she fell asleep.

"HERE'S ANOTHER parcel from America," Jenny said. "They seem to come by every post."

"Yes, I must admit I'd rather forgotten I arranged with so many people to send me things," Dr. Whickham said.

They had been home for three weeks, and the task of sorting out the accumulated notes of three months was well under way.

It was strange to Jenny to be living in King's Carrister again, but not at the Hall. She had taken up bed-and-breakfast residence at a small guest-house, but in all other respects she accepted Dr. Whickham's invitation to use his cottage as her home. During the three months they had traveled together in America their relationship had grown closer, and she now openly treated him as she had once treated Sir Leonard.

She left Dr. Whickham to untie the newly arrived parcel.

"That's excellent," he said when he saw the contents.

She looked over his shoulder and saw photographs of pen-and-ink drawings that looked as if they had been done by Hugh Dorner.

"I've never seen these pictures before," she said curiously. "Who are they supposed to be?"

"A Mr. Spellman's ancestors who were in the original colony. Look, here's a family group that—my dear girl, whatever is so funny?"

"I'm sorry," she said, chuckling. "I've always known Hugh Dorner was a poor artist. Now I know he was a fraud as well."

"What do you mean?"

"You ought to go and look at the Dorner ceiling in the Hall sometime. You'll find all these faces there."

"What?"

"I think Hugh Dorner was one of those artists who had a limited repertoire of about three basic faces. In the ceiling, he passed them off as Carristers, and he's used them again here. I could point to faces on the ceiling that are identical to the Spellmans'."

"But my dear girl, what a discovery." Dr. Whickham bounded up in great excitement. "I've never heard anybody say this about poor old Dormer before. Of course we'd need to have photographs of the ceiling to substantiate it—you'll have to come with me and show me which ones—"

"No, I can't do that," Jenny spoke quietly. "Philip threw me out, remember?"

She would not be budged from this stand, and the matter was allowed to drop. That night, trying to get to sleep, she forced herself to consider the future. It was a relief to know that Philip was not in the area, but for how long could she continue to live in King's Carrister, where everything reminded her of the past, and where Philip might arrive at any moment? The meeting in America had unsettled her. She could never forget him, but she had begun to grow used to not seeing him.

Two days later she went in to work to find Dr. Whickham in a state of high excitement.

"I have some news for you." He beamed. "We can go to Carrister Hall today. We have the new owner's permission."

Something thudded painfully in her chest. "The new owner?" she whispered.

"Yes. It's all settled. I've been in touch with Mr. Trask. We are expected this morning."

She sat down. "The new owner," she repeated. "I had no idea—"

"No. Philip disposed of the place very quickly, it seems. Isn't that lucky for us? There's nothing to stop you coming with me now."

"You mean—the new owner has actually taken possession?"

"As of today, I understand."

They drove in Dr. Whickham's car, arriving at Carrister Hall without incident.

"The last time I saw this place it was on the verge of falling down," said Dr. Whickham. "Look at it now. Philip must have spent a fortune."

She raised her eyes to the roof and realized that it was watertight again. So was the house, for several warped window frames had been replaced, and there were no more cracked windowpanes. All the outside piping was new. Silently she blessed Philip. Carrister Hall now looked as it should, and she was grateful.

Inside, she wandered from room to room, everywhere finding evidence of his care. Love was built into every freshly renovated line of the Hall. And yet he had sold it. It made no sense.

They came at last to the room with the Dormer ceiling, and Jenny pointed out the faces. Dr. Whickham, studying them through binoculars, grew more excited by the minute.

"It's a sensation," he crowed. "If only I could get nearer."

"You used to be able to see part of it well from the minstrels' gallery," she said. "I locked the door when the wood-work became unsafe—"

"It's quite safe now," a voice behind her said.

As she whirled she was only half surprised. Philip advanced down the long room and she went to meet him.

"I want to thank you," she said in a clear, calm voice. "You've made the Hall look the way I always dreamed of it. If the new owner treats it as well, I shall be content. Thank you, Philip, with all my heart."

"You really like it?" He sounded anxious.

"Yes. You've made yourself its master by right now. I just wish you were going to continue as the owner."

He shook his head. "I can't do that. Someone else has more right than me."

She stared up at him, trying to work out what he meant, but unable to think clearly for the racing of her pulses. He

was so near, and she loved him with such frightening intensity.

Above her head she heard Dr. Whickham's voice and realized that he had climbed into the minstrels' gallery.

"You won't be needing me anymore now, will you, Philip?" he called down.

"No, thanks," Philip called back. "You did your part just fine."

They were standing near a door and as Philip said these words he whisked Jenny through it and shut it firmly behind him.

"You were in this together," she accused. "Both of you. It was a conspiracy—"

The last word was choked off into a silence that lasted for a very long time. When the world finally stopped spinning, she gasped and held on to him. But she did not speak. Nor did he. She buried her face in his shoulder, feeling his hand moving in her hair, while his lips fiercely caressed the top of her head. At last she felt his arms tighten about her.

"Tell me that it isn't too late," he pleaded. "Tell me that you still love me. Please, Jenny, tell me I can have another chance."

She stared, bewildered. "But—I thought—that was what I was asking—in my letter—"

He reddened slightly. "I have a confession to make. Tell me first that you love me, that you'll forgive me whatever it is."

She kissed him lingeringly. "I love you," she said in wonder. "And there's nothing I wouldn't forgive you."

"I never read your letter."

"What?"

"At least—I read it three weeks ago, after we met. Let me explain. At first I didn't want to read it. I told myself everything was over between us, and I set my face against you, just as you did against me when you refused to speak to me on the phone."

"Then, when we met that night, with my mother, I was overjoyed to see you. I thought you'd changed your mind and

come to find me, to say everything was all right. But you fell over yourself to tell me you wouldn't have come near the place if you'd known I was there.

"I wish you could have heard what my mother said to me after you'd gone. The gist of it was that I was not only a monster of pride, but I was also a coward, since if I'd had the courage to read your letter in the first place I could have saved us both a lot of unhappiness.

"Can you ever forgive me for what I've done to you?"

She found herself being ruthlessly kissed again before she could speak, and she gave herself up totally to the joyous feeling of his arms about her and his lips on hers. All the misery and pain of the last few months was washed away in the realization that Philip still loved her, and that somehow they had found each other again.

"I'll forgive you if you forgive me," she whispered, as his fingers gently caressed the back of her neck.

"But whom did you sell Carrister Hall to?" she said.

"Who said I sold it?"

"Dr. Whickham said there was a new owner. That was why I agreed to—Philip—" her excitement began to rise "—was that just part of your plan to get me here? You're going to keep it?"

"No, I can't keep it. Like I told you, there's someone who has a better right than me. Here—" He took an envelope from his inside pocket. "You'll find everything you need to know about the new owner in there."

He had to open it for her, because her hands were shaking. But when she tried to read, it took a long time because the words wouldn't keep still.

"It's a deed of gift in respect of marriage," she said slowly at last.

"That's right. Did I spell Guinevere properly?"

She nodded. The lump in her throat was making it impossible to speak, and tears had begun to run down her cheeks.

But Philip seemed to find this reaction satisfactory, and he took her into his arms until the storm had subsided.

"I always told you I'd give it back to you as a wedding present, Jenny. It's yours by right."

Dr. Whickham's head came around the door.

"I'm sorry to bother you with something unpleasant," he said, "but Jack Esterby is downstairs."

Jenny stiffened, but Philip's arm was strong around her shoulders.

"Let's go down and see him," he said. "I have something to say to Esterby that I think you'll enjoy hearing."

Together they went down the staircase into the main hall. At Philip's urging she went a little ahead, so that Esterby saw her first and thought she was alone. His face took on the smug, sneering look she remembered, changing with comic abruptness as Philip came into view. He took a step backward.

"There is a witness this time," he said.

"Luckily for you there is," Philip said. "Otherwise I'd take great pleasure in giving you what you deserve for the mean, vicious thing you've done."

"We'll see how big you talk after the next council meeting," Esterby jeered. "Think I don't know you had a valuer down here last month? Trying to jack the price up just because you've banged a few nails in."

"Mr. Esterby," Philip's voice had a soft deadliness. "That man was an official from the Department of the Environment. He said Carrister Hall was the finest example of early fifteenth-century architecture he'd ever seen. He also said that the Dormer ceiling was of unique historic interest. Mr. Esterby, you are standing in a listed building. And that means there is now a government order on this building making it illegal for anyone to knock it down. There is further an obligation on the owner to preserve it in a state of good repair. Now get

out of here before I blacken your other eye, witness or no witness."

When Jack Esterby had departed, Philip turned to find Jenny looking at him as though she were seeing him for the first time.

"Do you think our ancestors would be proud of me?" he said.

"They were lined up behind you, cheering," she said joyously.

"Could we go upstairs and pay them a visit? I still have something to tell you, and I'll do it better with them around."

When they reached the picture gallery he made her close her eyes before saying, "Now, look."

In the picture of Sir Henry with his two sons, the Labrador was gone. In its place was a very young man with russet hair, the color of Jenny's own, and blunt features.

"I put it in the hands of a good restorer," Philip said, "and there was Granddad underneath. I thought it was about time he came back to his family."

"It's perfect," she breathed.

"I've something else to show you. Over here."

He drew her to where the paintings ended and the photographs began. And there, on the very end, was a photograph of Sir Leonard, stiff and erect, his forbidding expression belied by the kindness of his eyes.

"I'd forgotten about that," she breathed. "It was taken last year. Grandpa hated it so I hid it away."

"I found it in your room after you'd gone. But I want you to look at what's written underneath."

She peered closer and saw "Sir Leonard Carrister—the last baronet."

"Will you mind terribly not being Lady Carrister, Jenny? If I claimed the title I'd feel I was playing a part. Your great-grandfather not only came from an age when titles still meant something, he was a hard act to follow. I'd like to honor him by not trying."

"I think even Grandpa would have liked it," she said. "It would have appealed to him to be the glorious final chapter. And the only title I care about is Mrs. Philip Thornhill."

In a moment she was crushed against him, feeling the beat of his heart against her own, and his lips against hers, more demanding than ever before.

"Let's get married as soon as possible," he murmured after a while. "I

don't think my Victorian principles^{35, 1211} are going to hold out much longer."

She chuckled and rested her head contentedly against his shoulder. Her eyes fell on Grandpa's photograph. It was easy, she thought, to be fanciful when you were blissfully happy. Otherwise she might have thought the face in the picture had softened, welcoming her home.

But that, of course, was ridiculous.





**SANDRA
KITT**
**Rites of
Spring**



When Cord Temple placed the want ad, he knew his plan would be perfectly executed—if he could just find a woman he was attracted to!

With a clap of hands that echoed in the large open room, a voice intoned, "Okay. That's it for today," and eight people headed for the changing room.

Monica Hamlin stood at the barre in front of the mirror that ran the length of the room, slowly controlling her exhausted breathing. Her long auburn hair was pinned into a sleek coil at the back of her head, and a scarf tied around her neckline caught the perspiration. Nonetheless, her heart-shaped face and the long slender column of her neck were shiny with moisture.

Now she clenched her teeth in sudden pain, fighting the urge to cry out.

"Monica, dear, are you all right?" Monsieur Denier, the master, minced over, shaking his head.

"My dear, my dear! You cannot do this thing to your body!" he lamented. "We can push our bodies to the limit and sometimes beyond. But no, we can't abuse them!"

"I know, monsieur," Monica finally put out. "I just...I'd hoped it was a one-time thing."

"Monica! If the specialist says you cannot move the body this way, then you just not!"

With a hand towel, she mopped her neck and face. "He could be wrong. Anyway, I'm to see another specialist this afternoon. Maybe—"

"Maybe's will not do! Is it not better to follow the doctor's advice? Take eighteen months off from the troupe. Noress on the system."

Monica groaned. "Monsieur! A year and a half... Do you have any idea what that could mean to my career? My body?"

She did not add that she also needed the money from working.

Monsieur Denier wagged an indulgent finger under her nose. "You be a good girl, Monica, and do what the doctor tells you!"

Monica headed for the dressing room. Once changed, she checked the address for Dr. Jerome Bender, a prominent chiropractor. With her oversize tote on her shoulder, Monica wandered to the fountain in front of the New York State Theater of Lincoln Center and sat on its cement ledge. It was late April and there was a brisk spring wind, which she didn't seem to notice as she sat deep in thought.

Taller than the average female dancer, Monica was almost six feet tall on pointe. She'd had to work harder to conform her body to that of a dancer, and she'd started late. But dance was all she knew. It had given purpose to twenty of her twenty-seven years. And now it was threatened.

Nearly two hours later, she dressed for the third time that day and came back to sit in the chair in the doctor's office.

Doctor Bender placed the six X-ray sheets on a wall display box lit from behind. He studied them silently for several minutes.

"Monica," he began, "why are you a dancer?"

She looked at him blankly. "Why? Because...it's what I do best. What I've worked hard for."

"Have you ever given any thought to the time when you can't dance anymore?"

She was suddenly very alert. "I don't know." She shrugged. "I mean, we all say we'll teach the next generation of Joffrey hopefuls, or maybe choreographer. Dr. B., are you...are you saying—"

"No, no! I'm just asking. I ask my tennis pros and my football players the same thing. What I mean, my dear, is that I hope you are prepared, at least in thought, for the time when you can no longer dance. It's never too early to think about it."

He turned to the X rays on the wall and pointed a finger to the second and third ones.

"According to these, you should never have been a dancer!"

"What—?" Monica barely whispered.

"Your body isn't really structured for it. You know yourself not everyone is built to dance ballet. The dance form itself is unnatural. You have a kind of structure that has been forced into the ballet stance of hips forward, pelvis straight, and you are putting too much unnatural stress on the sockets and joints."

"Do I have to give up dance?"

"For now, yes," he said. "The condition is not severe yet. It's done no damage to the pelvic bone or cavity."

Monica let out a sigh of despair and Dr. Bender came around the front of his desk to take her hand and pat it.

"I recommend that you not dance for a year or so. Rest the body. You can continue with your daily classes. But I'll give you a list of certain things you should not do."

Monica looked up at him through a blur of tears. "What happens after the year is over?"

"You try your complete repertoire of exercises and steps. We'll take some more X rays and if all goes well, you could dance for another five, maybe eight years!"

"What—what if nothing has improved?"

Dr. Bender frowned and pursed his lips. He sat down to continue his notes.

"Well, then," he said, "I can think of at least four Joffrey hopefuls for your dance class!"

"I LOVE YOU, NIKI."

"I love you too, Lee. I'll call you just before your audition. Tell Mother I say hello. 'Bye.'"

Monica sat for long moments after hanging up the phone. Old emotions were always stirred up when she was in touch with home, on the West Coast. She called because of her love for her stepsister, Lee Ann.

When Monica Hamlin was almost four, her natural mother had died, leaving her with a father too devastated by his loss to have much time for her. She was seven when he met and married Eileen, a petite, beautiful woman who was a dancer.

At seven, Monica was very shy. Eileen decided the cure for that was to study dance, something that required discipline and hard work. For Monica, it was a lifeline. She soaked up the dance and the music and the atmosphere like a sponge.

Eileen suffered a serious injury when Monica was almost eleven, ending her short but successful dance career. She reluctantly found herself pregnant, and gave birth to Lee Ann. If Monica hoped that a child of her stepmother's would soften her selfish, hard edges, she was wrong. As Eileen struggled to pull her petite frame back to its slender shape Monica at twelve, was left to be mother, sister and father—her father had died—to the infant Lee. And this had been her second lifeline, for all the love she so desperately lacked was given to and received from her stepsister.

Lee Ann was introduced to dance at the age of four, and by the time she was six, it was suggested that hers was a natural ballet talent. The only thing Eileen had done for either daughter was to push them in the pursuit of dance. They were both grateful to her for that. Now Lee Ann had the opportunity of a lifetime and it all rested on Monica.

MONICA SIGHED and stretched. She had to prepare for her afternoon class. She

left the privacy of her bedroom, in an apartment she shared with another dancer, Donna Connors, who did Broadway musicals. They'd met in dance class Monica's second year in New York.

It was the perfect arrangement, for it gave them an apartment on Central Park West that neither could have afforded alone.

In the living room, Monica saw a note from Donna, telling her of a job opportunity that could mean a lot of money. Knowing that Monica would not be dancing, she thought she should check out the information. Donna would explain it all that evening.

"I DON'T KNOW, Donna. It just sounds so strange. Why would he need to see my birth certificate? Or need a record of my health for the last five years? Who is this person? What does he do?"

Donna sighed. They'd been through this twice already. "I don't know. The lawyer for my show happened to say a few words to some of the women. If you're interested, I'll give you his number. Then you can badger him for more information!"

Monica blurted, "Oh, Donna, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to give you the third degree. But it's so mysterious!"

"Well, the lawyer said it could mean a lot of money. Just because you call doesn't obligate you. Or maybe you have some better offer?"

"No. I don't even know where to look for other work. All I know is dance!"

"I know," Donna said with real sympathy. She was a tall, shapely black woman with a cheerful presence. "I think what I would do," she continued, "is to hear what the man had to say. Then it's up to you! Simple!"

Monica sat in an armchair and hugged a pillow close to her middle, as though it gave her comfort. "Okay..." she said with real hesitation.

MONICA HAD never been to the New York Hilton Hotel. She was to see the pro-

spective employer's lawyer, a Mr. Lawrence Gordon, in suite four-thirteen.

A desk clerk directed her to a bank of elevators, and a receptionist showed her to his office.

"Miss Hamlin?" Lawrence Gordon introduced himself. "Please come in!"

Monica stepped past him into a huge sitting room, with two very long sofas, armchairs, a large desk, and a picture window behind it.

Lawrence Gordon was a kindly looking man of average height, dressed in a dark gray business suit. He was bald, and Monica guessed him to be about sixty.

"Have a seat! Have a seat!" he urged Monica. "I know you're anxious to hear what this is all about."

She allowed herself to be led to an armchair and gently seated.

"Can I offer you coffee...a cocktail?"

"Nothing, thank you." Monica smiled fleetingly, sitting on the edge of her chair. Mr. Gordon sat across from her.

"Well, why don't you tell me a little about yourself. What you do, where you're from."

"I've lived in New York for almost seven years. I'm originally from California—" She hesitated. "Both my natural parents are dead, but I do have a stepmother and sister still on the coast."

"Are you close to your family?" Gordon interrupted.

"Not with my stepmother. I'm very close to my stepsister."

"I see. Please continue."

"I'm a dancer with the New York Corps de Ballet."

"Are you performing now?"

"No," Monica answered. "I've been advised not to dance for a time, to try and correct a—a condition."

"A physical disability?" He sounded disappointed.

"No. But if it's not corrected it means I can't dance anymore. That's why I need other work."

He cleared his throat. "Yes. I suppose you do want to know about the, ah, the

job." He put his glasses on and opened a folder.

"I represent a gentleman who wants to put forth a business arrangement, to last for twelve to sixteen months. It would provide the, ah, the settlement, or salary of fifty thousand dollars—"

Monica's eyes widened in astonishment at the sum. "But that's a lot of money!"

"Yes, it is. Of course, all expenses and personal needs will be taken care of above and beyond that."

"For what?" Monica asked.

"For having a baby."

Monica stared. He couldn't possibly have said that. "For..." she prompted, wanting him to repeat his words.

He nodded. "...having a baby." A long breath came out of her as she sat back heavily in her chair.

Mr. Gordon cleared his throat again.

"Let me give you a bit of information about my client, to help explain why he would propose such a thing.

"He's a businessman of some talent and standing. He's single and forty years old, without, ah, any attachments. He has amassed a bit of an estate that he'd like to leave to an heir. He loves children and would dearly love to have one of his own.

"A conventional marriage would not suit his needs, and he's ruled out adoption, although he has considered it seriously. I think...it's a very personal need to satisfy his ego."

Monica stiffened. Another person set on ego gratification. She began to shake her head and gather her things. "No," she said. "You can't be serious."

"I assure you my client is very serious. And he is an honorable man. It's to be a business arrangement—a contract with terms will be drawn up."

Monica listened, but was still very shaken. It would be like selling herself. Worse, selling the baby. She said as much to Lawrence Gordon.

"I suppose that's one way of looking at it. But, if you have no particular thoughts about motherhood, then it be-

comes just a job. Unusual, true, but any other job would also be using you and paying you for that use." Gordon saw the doubt in her face, but she was listening. He found himself wanting her to understand.

"Take yourself. Think of all the years and pain of classes and training you subjected yourself to so that someone else could use your body to an end and pay you. You do that freely."

"But you're talking about a child, Mr. Gordon."

"Do you hope to be a mother someday, Miss Hamlin?"

Monica thought sadly of her own solitary childhood. "Not especially," she answered softly.

"But you have no objections to someone who dearly wants a child to do so...with help?"

"No," she said reluctantly.

"Well, then, we're only asking you to help achieve that. We wish to use your body. In exchange, a fee will be paid you."

Monica was silent.

"Perhaps it would help if I tell you that my client will go through a marriage ceremony as part of the legal agreement, to be terminated at the end of the contract. This will provide the protection of a name and a husband. It will simply end as a no-contest divorce!"

Monica's head came up. "But what if the woman refused the divorce? Or changes her mind about the baby? What legal grounds do you have?"

"There's a provision for all possibilities in the contract."

Monica looked thoughtfully at Lawrence Gordon. "Your client must want a natural child very badly."

"He does."

"Do you mind my asking how your other candidates have responded?"

"Not at all. It's been pretty broad—from eagerness to comply to absolute disbelief."

Monica shook her head. "It's—it's just that I—"

At that moment a door opened behind Monica and closed again. Gordon stood up and smiled. Monica turned to look at the man entering the room. He was at least six foot three, and seemed to be all shoulders and long solidly shaped legs.

Monica was aware of raw, animal strength and virility. His eyes were on Gordon, but Monica saw that they were oddly light in color. He had a strong athletic build, and though his thick curly hair was almost iron gray, his eyebrows and the tight curl of hair at his shirt opening were black. There was a hard, controlled cast of his features that made Monica wonder how he could ever unbend enough to show love and affection to a child. For this was Lawrence Gordon's client. He made the introductions.

"How do you do, Miss Hamlin?" Cortland Temple acknowledged in a deep voice. Monica had the impression that his eyes took in every detail of her appearance. She raised her chin almost defiantly. He shook her hand and her delicate dancer's palm was lost in his. The grip was firm, but not hard. "Please continue." He waved a careless hand to the lawyer.

"Now, where were we?" said Gordon.

"You were still trying to convince me that this isn't all crazy," Monica supplied.

"Are you saying, Miss Hamlin, that you could not consider such a scheme?"

Monica frowned and thought of her options. There weren't any. And the money was not for herself. If it were, she'd certainly manage some other way. But now, she'd promised to pay for Lee Ann's dance tuition.

"I don't know, Mr. Gordon. I'm just not sure."

"Would you mind if I asked a few questions?" came the voice behind her, and Cortland came to sit on the edge of the desk facing Monica. "Do you find the arrangement distasteful, Miss Hamlin?"

"Not distasteful. But certainly of questionable taste!"

"Have you never heard of this sort of thing before?"

"Not exactly. I'm aware that there's always been a black market in babies."

"But we're proposing an up-front, aboveboard business deal."

Before Monica could respond he asked to see her birth certificate and health records.

"Why do you have to stop your dancing, Miss Hamlin?" she was asked.

"I—I have a hip disorder. There's no help for it except rest. I'm not supposed to dance for a year and a half."

"And then?"

She shrugged. "Either the ailment will be improved, or it won't." She looked at Cortland directly as he handed the papers back.

Then he nodded to Gordon and moved toward the door. "Okay, Lawrence," he said, as if giving approval.

"Just a moment," Monica said, lifting her chin. "I'd like to see your medical records!"

Cortland Temple frowned, but walked back to the desk. He passed a folder to Monica, waiting as she looked it over.

She made quick note of the fact that other than a broken arm at thirteen, Cortland Temple was in excellent health.

"Does it meet with your approval, Miss Hamlin?" he asked sarcastically. Monica only nodded. "I'm so glad," he said, heading for the door. "You can finish, Mr. Gordon. I have a business appointment. Nice to have met you, Miss Hamlin." The door closed behind him.

Monica and the lawyer talked for another half hour, and he suggested that she call and let them know her decision. Mr. Temple would be in New York for another week.

She left the Hilton feeling overwhelmed, with the image of Cortland Temple fresh in her mind.

*

FOR THREE DAYS Monica battled with the idea. She lay awake at night debating the moral side, the ethics, the right or wrong. What finally swayed her was the pressing need for the money, and unable to delay longer, she called Cortland Temple, saying she wished to be considered in his plan. He turned the phone over to Lawrence Gordon, who promised to let her know as soon as possible.

In the mail that afternoon was a letter from Lee, giving the audition date for her presentation to representatives of the Royal Ballet, London, England. It was in three weeks. Monica had to get the job now. She knew no one from whom she could borrow that kind of money, and it was too late to attempt a bank loan. Besides, she had no collateral.

At four-thirty the following afternoon, Mr. Gordon's jovial voice informed her by phone that Cortland Temple would like to enter into a business agreement with her and to meet with her and an attorney as soon as possible to draw up the papers.

On the appointed day, Monica took extra care of her appearance. She decided on a lightweight spring suit and heels. She and her lawyer proceeded to the hotel suite where Lawrence Gordon was busy shuffling papers. He looked up only long enough to smile at Monica's presence. Cortland Temple wasted no time.

"Gentlemen, Miss Hamlin, there's quite a bit to cover before we actually sign the papers so I suggest we begin at once. I've arranged for us to have lunch here should these proceedings run past noon."

If Monica's lawyer was surprised at the proposal, he was professional enough to hide it. But when he was given a copy of the contract to go over, he drew Monica aside to ask if she wanted time to reconsider. Monica looked at Cortland Temple's taut body, thought of her sister, and knew there was no time left.

She assured her lawyer it was what she wanted to do. That left only details to be worked out. An account would be opened in her name with one thousand dollars. An additional ten thousand would be added when she was pregnant. At the mention of this, the men visibly squirmed, except for Cortland, who merely looked briefly at Monica.

Fourteen thousand would be added at the baby's birth, and the rest when the contract was terminated. They would go through a civil wedding ceremony, which was scheduled for a week's time. Monica was to bring one witness. She could then continue living her own life in her own apartment if she wished, so long as Cortland Temple could keep tabs on her condition and progress.

Monica left in a daze. She hoped fervently that Lee Ann wanted to study in London, and that her dance teachers over the last ten years had not misjudged her talents. She hoped she was not making a dreadful mistake.

ON MONICA'S wedding day, the sun shone brilliantly in a clear blue sky. It was May first, and somewhere ancient rites were being performed with ribbons and children and songs around a Maypole in celebration. For Monica, it was the beginning of a long performance, this time offstage.

She elected to wear a simple ecru silk dress belonging to Donna. It had a high button stand-up collar, which emphasized her long, graceful neck. The sleeves were sheer and very full to the wrist. Her hair, as always, was softly twisted into a bun, today more on top of her head.

Monica had had to tell Donna of the arrangement, eliciting a gasp of pure surprise. Donna agreed to act as witness because she was curious about the man. She didn't realize that it had nothing to do with Cortland himself, but Monica's love for her sister.

It was Donna who saw to it that Monica had a small bouquet of flowers to hold. She also offered to make herself

scarce from the apartment for them later that afternoon. And if Donna had not been there to nudge her, Monica might never have shown up at the judge's chambers on Center Street.

She went through the brief ceremony, f a little glassy eyed, at least with a clear firm voice and her head up. Cord bent to give the traditional kiss but Monica moved her head, and he just grazed her pale cheek.

Donna quietly congratulated them, but soon escaped from the tension and awkwardness of the occasion. She kissed Monica on the cheek, whispering that she'd call her in a few days. Donna wasn't sure Monica had heard.

Lawrence Gordon suggested getting a drink somewhere, so the unusual bridal party got into a cab and headed for Tavern on the Green in Central Park.

Monica did little talking while they had their drinks, absently peering out the window at the spring flowers in the restaurant's garden. She responded to the two men only when spoken to.

Finally, Gordon sensed it was time he left the newlyweds alone. The two men rose and shook hands. Lawrence took Monica's hand in his and squeezed it, smiling. "Good luck, my dear. I hope his works out for you." Monica smiled weakly, as Cord sat back down and turned to her.

"Look, I know it's been a trying afternoon...for both of us," he began. "I think we should have something to eat. Drinks on an empty stomach are not good for you."

Monica nodded. "I don't like to drink very much," she volunteered.

"Good!" he responded and passed her menu. Monica knew she could never swallow more than a salad, and that was all she ordered. Cord ordered soup, tuffed veal, vegetables, and a bottle of wine. He quirked a brow at her. "You're much too thin, you know."

Monica became defensive, her nerves already raw. "Dancers are supposed to be thin."

"But you won't be dancing."

"That's no reason to let my body go!"

"You will gain weight, you know," he said in amusement, causing Monica to go red.

Monica picked at her salad the way she'd nursed her drink earlier. They spoke little during the meal.

"What will you do during the days ahead?" he suddenly asked, sipping at his wine. There was real curiosity in his gray eyes, and she couldn't help noticing again how ruggedly handsome he was. His dark gray suit made his hair look silver.

"I'd like to keep my apartment. I thought I'd continue to take my daily classes. The chiropractor devised some special exercises for me. I might teach..." her voice trailed off, and suddenly she felt close to tears.

Cord frowned at her, considering this attractive stranger with burnished hair and so much poise and grace. She was very strong, he could see that. She'd have to be to face the possibility of losing her career. But she was also vulnerable. He was curious as to why she'd agreed to this arrangement.

"Why don't we leave?" he said softly.

Monica's amber eyes flew wide open. "Where to?" she asked.

"My hotel...your apartment..."

"Oh!" she said, realizing how naive she sounded. "My apartment, then."

They walked the five blocks in silence. Once there, Cord walked casually into the living room.

"It's comfortable here," he commented quietly.

"Thank you."

"Where is your roommate? Donna, is it?"

"Yes. She...she's away for a few days."

"I see." He turned now to face Monica and she was suddenly frightened of his alert eyes seeing too much. They seemed to reach right into a person's soul.

Cord slowly walked toward her. "Monica," he began with surprising

gentleness that didn't reach his eyes, "we both know what has to happen."

She nodded as though in a trance and turned to walk into her room. Cord was right behind her, and he closed the bedroom door. With her back toward him, Monica began to unbutton the dress and remove it. She could hear Cord removing his own clothes, then he was pulling back the blanket and climbing into her bed.

Cautiously she climbed into the other side. It was a peculiar feeling. Monica had never slept with a man in this bed, in this room. She felt now that Cord was invading every part of her life and existence. Her arm and leg touched his and she found his limbs cool.

Cord reached out a large hand and gently turned her to face him. She placed both hands on his chest as though to brace herself. The thick curly hair was crisp and springy under her fingers. Cord drew her slowly against his hard body and she was shocked at the firm feel of him. Their closeness trapped her hands between them, her face almost against his shoulder, as Cord slowly began to stroke her shoulder and slender back. He pressed her hip and buttocks, pulling her lower body closer to him. Monica could not help a soft gasp as she felt him full, aroused and taut against her middle.

Cord did not kiss her at all. He did not care to pleasure either her or himself. He only stroked her to relax her and so make it easy to accomplish the act. His hand was slow beneath her thigh, continually pressing her against him. Monica began to relax and finally softened against him. Little eddies, swirling sensations that she had never felt before, began in her stomach.

Cord carefully rolled Monica onto her back. He did not let his entire weight settle on her, but he brought them together, intimately, and she concentrated on moving the way he indicated, rhythmically, slowly. Nothing was said and there was very little sound. Cord moved suddenly hard against her. Then he let out a sigh and lifted himself away, end-

ing his embrace. Monica felt an odd dizziness and she trembled.

They were silent for quite a long time, so Monica was surprised when Cord turned to her a second time. There were strange new feelings this time that she was not ready to deal with, and she kept herself aloof. She was just a body, performing a function.

She must have gone to sleep, because the next thing she was aware of was the door opening. Cord was standing fully dressed in the doorway against a soft light from the living room.

"I'm going back to the hotel," he said, all gentleness gone from him. "It's been a long day. I suggest you get some rest."

Monica said nothing.

"I have to take care of some business tomorrow, but I'll be here at six. We'll go for dinner if you wish."

"Fine," she managed to get out, a chill shaking her body. He continued to look at her, but she could not see his expression. Cord finally said good-night and left.

THEIR THIRD NIGHT together, the tension of the situation drove her to the edge of hysteria. Shortly after Cord began to stroke her, she started to cry silently. He became aware of the quaking of her body, but continued his movements until his release. Monica continued to cry, rolling onto her side until she was again asleep. She did not awaken when he left.

A week of this was about all either of them could stand. After another sterile night together, with Monica stiff, tense, and in tears, Cord flung himself from the bed.

"Dammit, Monica. Why are you crying? Am I hurting you? Are you in pain?" His harsh tone only added to her misery and she silently shook her head.

Muttering a further oath, Cord dressed hurriedly and left without saying another word. He called the next day to say he had to fly to Texas on business and wasn't sure when he'd be back. If there

re any problems, she was to contact Lawrence Gordon, at his law firm.

Monica was relieved for the sudden parture, hoping the time would help r pull herself together.

When Cord had been gone a week, Monica again began to feel safe. By the xt week, she had no doubts that she ould soon be in the midst of getting Lee f to England—the most important ing to her right now. Lee deserved the ance to succeed.

Monica sighed and hugged her body as e entered her building that evening. nce Lee was settled, she would finish is...this thing she was to do, which was aking the Royal Ballet school possible. fterwards she would take several onths to get back into shape and reore her body to performance level. opefully, next summer, she would again on tour. But as hard as Monica tried, e couldn't help a final abstract thought to what Cord Temple was doing at that oment.

CORD LOOKED like a weary traveler takg advantage of a long flight to get some st. But he was not asleep.

Through half-closed eyes, he watched i attractive raven-haired stewardess atnding to other passengers. Yes, she was etty, but she reminded him painfully of meone he used to know.

When Cord had first boarded the ne, he'd had to stop and grip a seat ck to steady himself. Seeing his disess, she had immediately come to his de.

"Sir! Are you all right?"

Cord drew a ragged breath. "I'm ne," he managed. "I just need to sit if ou don't mind."

"Of course," she said solicitously, iding him to his first-class seat. Cord ould see, once she was near, that she was t Natalie. But the moment had been wastating. Cord couldn't remember the st time he'd been so badly shaken. No, at was a lie. He could remember it very

well. It was the day he was to have been married... almost fifteen years ago....

HE'D FINISHED his degree in architecture, had several job offers, and the person he loved most was about to become his wife.

Natalie Kingman was petite and stuningly beautiful. Her hair was jet black with blue highlights, her eyes a delicate violet.

She was the only child of the head of Cord's architectural college. He'd met her when Dr. Kingman had invited his few top students to his home.

Natalie was terribly spoiled and she became very ambitious for Cord. Though he didn't want or need to be pushed, he humored her, basking in her attention. Yet their relationship was by no means smooth. And Natalie was in deadly earnest about being the wife of the best-known architect in America.

The young couple planned a June wedding, to take place right after Cord's graduation. It had rained the whole morning of the wedding day. Cord's best man, Matthew Bell, had been late, then had to drive back to his dorm because he'd forgotten the ring. The caterers had phoned to say it would be impossible to hold the reception outdoors because of the weather, and Cord was about to say cancel it, he just wanted to get married and get the hell away, when he was handed a hastily scribbled note. Begging his forgiveness for what she was about to do, Natalie had told him she was madly in love with Jeffrey Alan Burke, and they were going to elope.

"Please understand, darling..." she'd written. "But I've decided that Jeffrey and I are very much more suited to each other. *Natalie.*"

It had taken Matthew and Dr. Kingman to keep Cord under control.

In fifteen years Cord had never gotten involved with another woman. He'd had affairs purely for his physical needs, and then gone back to his own inclusive

world. But he had never given up wanting a child.

Natalie had been right about one thing. She and Burke were much better suited. He was now a senator... and she still his wife.

Cord let his eyes close. He wanted about three days of nonstop sleep. And then he would get back in touch with Monica. The irony of it struck him—marriage, which had once held such a sacred meaning for him, was now a simple expedient, legal means to an end.

Monica was a very pretty woman, Cord thought, although entirely too thin for his tastes. He wondered how her lovely face would look filled out a bit. He especially remembered her rather sensuous mouth, but he viewed her rather clinically, from afar, not at all as a man would normally look at a woman.

It was evident to him from their first night together that she was inexperienced. He had been oddly pleased by that. And the feel of her body against his own had been another surprise—despite her thinness, she had been very soft. Cord did not want her in his life, but she—or someone like her—could give him what he desperately wanted.

MONICA LEFT the studio in a hurry. When she burst into the apartment, she dumped bags, keys, and scarf to the floor as she grabbed the phone to dial California. It rang only once, and then a very excited Lee Ann was on the line.

"Niki, I won! I'm in! They liked me, Niki. Oh, God, I was so nervous. There were hundreds of guys and girls, but I won!"

Monica was laughing joyously at her sister's enthusiasm. "Oh, Lee Ann, I'm so proud of you. And you're happy?"

"Happy! Niki, I'm practically out of my mind!"

"What happens now?"

"Well, school is out, thank goodness. If we accept the position at the ballet academy we have to be there by June first."

"Is Mother helping you at all?" Monica asked.

"She said she'd pay for my plane ticket and some new clothes—but we're real counting on you."

Monica smiled ruefully. "Don't worry. You'll be in London on June first. I have a job. I'll send you regular checks for your room and board. Send me a list of what you need and I'll get a check off to you to get you started. Be sure to give me your address and the number for the school."

"Oh, Monica," Lee began in a soft voice. "You are the best sister."

"Oh, Lee, don't cry. You've worked hard for this and you deserve it. You're going to be a great dancer."

"But you shouldn't have to pay for all."

"Who else should I do it for if not my favorite person in all the world? Now don't forget to let me know how your plans are going."

"I won't, Niki. I'll talk to you soon."

*

IT WAS FRIDAY and Cord had spent three days meeting with Lawrence Gordon on business. He had been back in New York nearly a full week.

It was almost five o'clock when he finally decided to call Monica. The phone rang for seven uninterrupted tones, before he finally gave up in annoyance. I had never entered his mind that she wouldn't be home.

Cord had his solitary dinner and at 10:00 p.m. he tried calling Monica but again there was no answer. The weekend suddenly loomed ahead of him, unavoidable and empty. But he settled himself to get a good night's sleep.

When the phone rang at ten that Saturday morning, Monica was surprised to hear Cord's voice. She'd been rather euphoric the last few days, with her sister leaving for Europe. Lee Ann had a stopover of a few hours at Kennedy, so they'd happily spent Friday together.

Monica was still filled with that warm feeling when Cord called. She felt generous, and wanted to share some of her happiness.

"I've been trying to reach you," he said.

"I had to take someone to the airport," Monica fairly bubbled. "I didn't expect you to call... it's been weeks!"

"It hasn't been that long," Cord said. "I thought I'd come over."

Monica's heart lurched at the thought of his presence in the apartment again. She knew she couldn't avoid him, but she had to put him off for a bit. She needed time.

"We could spend the day together," she responded, with a marked drop in manner from a moment ago.

Cord frowned. "What do you have in mind?"

"I—I don't know, but I'll think of something."

"All right," he agreed. "I'll be over in an hour."

Monica chose a soft silk dress with a tiny floral print. It hugged her torso, gently emphasizing her firm breasts and tiny waist, and swung free from her hips to swirl lightly with each movement of her long legs. She put on a pair of low-heeled summer sandals and combed her hair into its usual knot. She made a very attractive picture, her rising apprehension adding natural color to her pale skin.

Taking a shawl and her straw shoulder bag, she left the apartment to meet Cord in front of the building. Fifteen minutes later he pulled up in a cab. Only a light surprise showed in his gray eyes as he saw her standing there smiling at him. As Cord walked slowly up to her, Monica admired the lean virile presence of him. She spoke before he had the chance. "I thought it would be nice to spend some time outdoors. It's too nice a day to be inside. Do you mind?" she asked.

Cord was not fooled by her smile. She was clearly stretching for more time. But he only shrugged and said, "Where would you like to go?"

"I like walking in the park."

"All right," Cord answered, taking her arm and turning toward Central Park.

"How was your business trip?" she ventured.

"It went well. I accomplished what I had to do."

"I don't doubt it," Monica mused under her breath. When Cord threw her a quick glance, she only smiled at him. He found himself staring for a second. She had dimples he had never noticed.

"What kind of work do you do?" she asked next.

"Why does it matter?"

"Why? Because it's important that you like what you do!"

"I'm an architect," he said, after allowing a pause.

"How interesting! What sort of buildings do you design?"

"The usual kinds," he said sarcastically, making her think it was a dumb question. He was still unaccountably annoyed about Friday, but he finally relented.

"Mostly corporate buildings. But I've done a few small schools, private homes, a church..." And an orphanage, which he didn't add.

"A church," Monica breathed. "A church has such special requirements. Did you find it a challenge?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. Not having spent a lot of time in any, I found it needed a lot of research. I once spent two weeks visiting cathedrals and abbeys throughout Europe to get a better sense of their history."

"It sounds very exciting. And fun," Monica commented.

Cord quirked a dark brow at her. "I don't know if it was fun exactly. But it was enlightening."

Monica winced. They looked at each other and grinned. "I know... no pun intended!" For the moment she was dazzled by his smile and thought how much younger it made him look. They walked for a moment, much more relaxed with one another.

"And I suppose you enjoy being a dancer," Cord commented.

A soft light glowed in Monica's amber eyes. "Enjoy it," she repeated. "It's my life!"

Cord was silent, not being able to think of a thing to say after that.

They found themselves at the children's zoo. Cord had never seen so many little kids and pregnant women and strollers in one place before. He watched the women with a sudden new interest. He and Monica finally came back to the west side of the park, ending up at Tavern on the Green again.

Cord suggested they stop there for lunch. When the wine had been poured, he touched his glass to hers and uttered a toast that seemed joyless and empty.

"Happy anniversary!"

"What?" Monica asked, stunned.

"Don't you remember? One month ago, almost to the day." He said it in rather a brittle and hard voice that sent a shiver through Monica.

"Yes, I remember," she whispered and took a gulp of wine. She didn't need to be reminded that there was hardly cause for celebration—of any kind.

He looked at Monica impatiently as he saw her stiffen and withdraw from him. But he also recognized that his comment had been mean. And he liked it better when she smiled. "What do you have planned for this afternoon?" It was asked in such a way that Monica blushed—she knew he realized what she'd been doing up to now.

"Oh, I thought we might go see the show Donna's in. She said she'd leave tickets for us."

"That sounds fine...and safe," he said with meaning, and Monica wanted to throw something at him.

Cord and Monica left the theater and stepped back into a day still brilliant with sunshine. But Monica knew her free time was over. She looked at Cord, forcing herself to smile. He helped her into a cab and they went back to her apartment.

THERE WAS A rustling behind Monica and she turned her head to look toward the

bed. The room was almost dark, but Cord's long form was easily discernible under the light bedspread. She hugged her knee, feeling warmth flowing through her. She was still remembering what had happened here just a few hours ago...and she didn't want ever to forget.

It was six o'clock when they'd returned to her apartment. She'd offered Cord a drink and poured herself fruit juice. She'd put a Chopin recording on the stereo and they'd sat next to each other in strained silence.

Cord remembered their last encounter with anger, especially Monica's tears, and the way she'd curled into herself after he'd released her and rolled away. He'd been impatient then, and he was beginning to feel impatient now. When he stood up and reached out his large hand to her, Monica took it, almost hypnotized by the sense of power that emanated from him. He turned and led the way to her room, closing the door behind them. Turning back to her, he gently placed his hands on her shoulders, then frowned when he felt her tremble. She refused to meet his eyes.

Cord moved his hands slowly down her bare arms, then put his hands on her waist. He was surprised to find how small it was. His fingers brushed a tie, he pulled, and her dress loosened around her. Monica put her hands on his to stop him.

"No," she murmured in a pleading voice.

"Suit yourself," he said indifferently, and began to undress.

Sun was still coming into the room, and Monica realized that he'd be able to see her completely now, and she him. It was so silly. What was there to hide after having been so intimate with him? But he was still a stranger to her.

Cord pulled the coverlet down and stretched out naked on the cool sheets. Keeping her back to him, Monica finished undressing. He chuckled grimly.

"You practice dance in almost nothing. You wear very little on stage before hundreds of strangers. Why are you so

modest now? You have a beautiful body."

But this did not make her feel any easier and she just lay stiffly next to him as she'd done in the past.

"Dammit, Monica," Cord said, as though to warn her he'd had enough of her play at shyness. But her lips were parted softly and looked full and pliant. He slowly bent forward, watching her mouth, her parted lips, and gently kissed her, then pulled back. It had been sweet. He leaned over and kissed her again, teasing the corners and the full curves. Then he completely covered her mouth with his own, kissing her fully and deeply, pulling her body against him.

Monica fought her growing feelings as the contact of his mouth sent shivers through her. With an almost painful moan she responded to his lips.

Cord had never kissed her before and he enjoyed the feel of her. He could also feel her body quake as he began to caress her, feel her hesitation, but the kiss was real. Suddenly, she trembled all over. Her hands clutched the bed linens, her eyes closed against him, but her mouth remained parted, as if she waited.

"My God!" Cord murmured in realization. "You've never fully—" But he got no further as Monica turned her head away and quietly began to cry.

This time Cord was not angry or impatient with her. She wasn't crying because she was hurt or because he repulsed her. She cried out of her own wanting. Cord now recognized that in her inexperience she had never been able to judge what she should feel or how she should respond. He'd aroused her, and she didn't know what to do.

Now Cord realized that Monica had never known the complete physical release and pleasure that was possible between a man and a woman. Perhaps she'd always believed one had to be in love—but if that was true, what was she to do with blood coursing rapidly through her veins as her heart pounded, or with skin so sensitive to the touch she felt as though she'd been burned?

He looked in total wonder at Monica's profile. He gently took her chin in his hand and turned her face back to his. She kept her eyes squeezed shut, ashamed by her own conflicting emotions. Her face was streaked with tears. There was a softening of Cord's features, the gray eyes less icy, the full mouth less stern. But Monica did not see.

Cord took her gently into his arms and lay on his side with her. Now he was gentle with another purpose in mind. He kissed the salty tears from her cheeks and Monica's eyes opened in surprise. Cord began to stroke her, caress her, and make love to her expertly. He trailed kisses down her throat and neck while his hands cupped her full breasts and thumbs teased pink tips into erection. Monica's breathing was rapid, but she lay unyielding. Cord took his time. He took her arms and put them around his neck, and drew her close to nuzzle the space between her neck and shoulder.

Monica could feel the whole room spinning as all her senses came alive. When Cord ran a hand sensuously down her back and under her thigh, her body jerked, hips rising up to his. Cord's lips moved to her ear and his warm breath made her tremble yet again.

"Let go, Monica," he whispered softly, as a low moan escaped her. "Let go," he coaxed again, even softer, his hands still caressing and stimulating her.

"I...can't!" she gasped, her fingers working through the curly hair on his neck.

"Yes, you can." And his mouth moved to kiss her. Her lips were already parted for him and when his tongue moved to deepen the caress she relaxed completely against him. Cord made no move to satisfy himself, only reading her movements and sounds. He never released her mouth, as if by concentrating on the kiss he could coax her body into responding on its own. He wasn't sure how long it took, but suddenly he heard her moan, and her back arched as she pressed closer to his taut middle.

Something reverberated through her body, rocking it, spiraling it beyond her control. Some kind of explosion that filled her with a languid, liquid warmth, making her breathless and weak. But Cord only held her while this thing happened, and after what seemed forever, her body settled itself. She buried her face in Cord's shoulder and held on, trying to catch her breath.

The strain was more than he would admit to, but he held her more comfortably against him, and they both fell asleep.

Two hours later Monica woke, surprised to find herself pressed against Cord's chest. She quietly moved away, got out of bed, and stood looking at him in wonder and something like tenderness. She stood that way for a long time before making her way to the window to sit hugging herself and staring into the dark.

And now she turned again to watch Cord. His gentleness had surprised her. That, combined with steady persistence and her own highly stimulated condition, had served to release her at last. He'd known exactly what he was doing, and she couldn't help wondering how many women he'd been with over the years to gain his expertise.

"Monica," came his husky voice from the dark. "Come here." It was said softly, but it was a command. She hesitated only a second before uncurling herself from the window seat. Stopping within a foot of him, she wrapped her arms around her naked breasts. Cord's hand reached out to her. "Come here," he whispered seductively, and drew her onto the bed next to him. As Cord pulled her on top of him, Monica drew in a breath at finding him already hard against her.

An old habit began to take hold of her, but Cord ran his hand down her back to her buttocks, pressing her to him. The other hand brought her face down so that he could kiss her in a leisurely fashion. When he released her mouth, Monica

found that she was already beginning to succumb to his touch.

"There's no need—" She tried to pull away.

"There's every need. The lesson isn't over yet." Cord wrapped his arms around her and rolled to reverse their positions. Then he took over again, building up her desire and need until she arched under him. This time Cord settled between her legs, bringing them together. He moved slowly on her until he felt her peaking and began to move to finish as well. He drew back and away, trying to catch his breath, but when Monica began to curl up again, Cord held her close.

"Monica," he began firmly, "there's no need to be embarrassed. This is supposed to feel good, you know." He stopped himself from adding that with someone you cared for, it was the most joyous thing to share.

CORD STAYED the night. Monica was very shy with him in the light of day, but he behaved as though nothing unusual had happened, and his usual cold mask dropped back into place. He showered, dressed, and looked virile and back in command as he entered the kitchen where Monica was making breakfast. Her skin was still a bit flushed, and her lips looked well kissed.

"I don't know why I'm so ravenous this morning." She laughed nervously. Cord raised a brow at her. He'd made love to her yet a third time and knew exactly why she was hungry. He sat at the table and she poured orange juice and coffee for him.

All the while her hands were busy with breakfast, her mind and body were aware that there was something different between them. Cord now knew her more thoroughly than anyone ever had. He had touched and kissed every inch of her body last night, bringing her exquisite sensations, and Monica knew she would never be the same again.

Cord told her of his plans for the week, including a cocktail party he was giving

for some of his clients, which he wanted her to attend. It was important that he begin to make her existence and their relationship known to others.

"That was a good breakfast," he said, finished his coffee and stood up. "I might be over Tuesday." He bent to kiss her.

Perversely, she became angry at this. How dare he decide when they'd see each other!

"I have something planned on Tuesday," she lied.

"Then you'll have to cancel. I *might* come over!"

"My life doesn't revolve around just you, you know!"

"For the next nine months or so, it had better!" Cord said with meaning and Monica blushed. Without another word, he left, and she closed the door behind him none too quietly.

But Cord knew that he would be back on Tuesday. He'd thoroughly enjoyed the feel of her now responding body under his, knowing he was responsible. He intended it to happen again soon.

DONNA PUT aside her magazine gingerly, trying not to smudge her nail polish. She glanced across at Monica, curled up in another chair reading a letter from Lee Ann.

"How's she doing?" Donna asked.

"What? Oh. Apparently very well." Monica mused. "She loves Europe, thinks the women unfriendly, but the men sexy."

Donna laughed. "How old did you say she was?"

"I'm beginning to think she's not old enough!"

"Don't be too concerned," Donna advised gently. "She had to spread those wings sometime. And if she were homesick and hated it, wouldn't that throw a rather large monkey wrench into your situation?"

"I—I still think it was worth the risk. Lee is going to be a great dancer!"

"I just hope she appreciates how it's been made possible," Donna commented caustically.

Monica went pale. "She's never to know."

"How do you intend to do that?"

"Donna, you're the only one who knows besides myself, Cord, and the lawyers. Lee Ann is not to find out."

"Monica, you know I'd never divulge your secret. Besides, it's none of my business."

Monica sighed and smiled ruefully. "Yes, it is. You've been very supportive. I can't forget that."

"Well, when this is all over, you can go back to your own life."

"If I get pregnant," Monica said.

Donna chuckled. "You've been with Cord almost all month. I would think there's every possibility."

Monica turned away. Yes, she'd been with Cord the whole month. And each night had been the same, this wonderful feeling of floating free.

Donna frowned at Monica's sudden silence. "You haven't heard from him this week, have you?"

"No, but then Cord's busy. And very unpredictable."

"Look," Donna said, "I'm going home for a week before catching up with the road troupe in Washington. Why don't you come? Mama would love to see you, and it will be better than being here alone."

"But what if Cord should call?" Monica asked.

Donna shrugged. "It won't hurt him not to find you for a day or two. Besides, you're looking thinner. Mama will put a few pounds on you!"

Monica laughed. "Probably more than a few!"

"So, you'll come?"

"Of course. I'd love to."

IT MUST HAVE been a record hot day for Paterson, New Jersey. The air was still and thick, and Monica felt suspended in it. Around her were the sounds of many

voices in family conversations, among them every now and then, the soothing voice of Mildred Connors, Donna's mother. She was a tiny woman but there had never been any doubt as to who nurtured the members of this group.

A slight smile curved Monica's mouth as she sat back against a garden lounge chair, her eyes closed. She turned her head toward the voice that had just called her name and, slowly opening her eyes, she saw Mama Connors approaching with a plate in one hand and a glass in the other.

"Now you sit up and eat this!" she told Monica. "You'll feel better with something in your stomach. I know!"

"But, Mama," Monica groaned, calling her by the name everyone else used, "I feel so much better when I don't eat too much!"

"Now. You feel bad because your stomach is empty. And I bet it's worse when you get up in the morning!"

Monica looked at her in surprise. "As a matter of fact, yes!"

Mama smiled knowingly and pushed the plate toward Monica. "Believe me. I know plenty about what's ailing you."

Mildred Connors stood waiting for Monica to begin eating. As she did, Monica began to feel less hollow inside. Mrs. Connors sat down.

"You know," she said softly, "in a few more weeks you'll feel much better. Your body just needs time to adjust itself."

"Adjust to what?" Monica asked.

Mama Connors raised her brows. "Why, to the baby, of course!"

Monica stared at her, and Mama Connors took her hand, holding the cold fingers in her small warm brown ones. "You didn't realize, did you?" she asked.

Monica just shook her head.

Mama touched the thin delicate band on the ring finger. "Donna didn't mention you'd gotten married. When?"

"Almost three months ago."

Mama chuckled softly. "Well, my guess is you're almost two months pregnant." She frowned. "Where's your husband?"

"He—he's just away on business." Monica hoped Mama Connors wouldn't ask where, because she had no idea.

"Well, I've brought five healthy children into this world. I know the signs. I knew the first day you arrived."

"What do I do?" Monica asked.

"Besides finding a doctor, there's not a lot to do! Nature will take care of just about everything!"

FOUR DAYS LATER, back in New York, she received an irate phone call from Cord.

"Where the hell have you been? I've been trying to reach you for a week!"

"I was away."

"When I'm in the city I expect you here as well!"

"Cord—"

"I don't like wasting my time. I hung around for days, then had to leave again—"

"Cord, please!" Monica said plaintively.

"Yes, what is it?" he snapped.

"Cord—" it came out barely as a whisper "—I'm pregnant!"

"My God!" was his dismayed response.

AFTER CORD'S INITIAL surprise, he had gotten angry with her. If she hadn't been unreachable, he might have been there in person to hear the news. At the time, Monica was just as happy that he wasn't in New York. But after a week and a half of near solitude, she would have been happy even for Cord's unruffled presence.

Trying to take a class today had been a mistake, she thought, as she left the dance studio for what was probably the last time until the next spring. Once home, she sat with her feet up, eating a container of yogurt and reading a letter from Lee Ann.

The dance classes were torturous, but already she was receiving praise. No easy task so early on.

Monica sighed. She was deep in a fit of sudden depression when the doorbell

ang, and more than a little surprised to find Cord standing there. He wore tan cotton jeans and an open-neck shirt. As usual, he looked in control and remarkably at ease.

"Hello, Monica," Cord said, stepping into the apartment. She looked thinner than he'd remembered and it lashed through his mind that perhaps he'd lied to him about being pregnant.

"How are you feeling?" he asked her.

Monica, feeling piqued by his cool front, snapped, "What do you care?"

Cord looked surprised, and then he said stiffly, "Don't be foolish. Of course care!"

Monica went a little limp and her sudden anger died just as quickly. "I'm sorry. Of course you do. After all, the child is what you want, isn't it?" she asked. How could she tell him she felt alone and more than a little afraid? "It's—been very hot. I've been feeling like a wilted leaf of lettuce!"

"Have you been ill?"

"Well, yes. I've been nauseous. And very tired."

"And what has the doctor advised?"

"The doctor?" She looked at him blankly.

"Of course! You've been to a doctor, haven't you?"

"No, I—" Monica began. "I haven't. know how to take care of my body."

"A dancer's body, perhaps. But not a body carrying a baby. A growing fetus needs a little more than yogurt and fruit juice! Go and get dressed. I'm taking you to see a doctor."

DR. MOLLY KAPLAN called Cord into the cheerful interior of her office while Monica dressed in the examining room. She gave him a friendly kiss on the cheek. "Congratulations!" she beamed.

"Thank you," he said evenly.

"On everything, apparently. I didn't know you'd married." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Your bride is lovely! A little too thin, but that's to be expected right now with morning sick-

ness." Dr. Kaplan sat behind her desk, Cord facing her. "And, I'm delighted to be of service! You did such a wonderful job on our summer house, the least I can do is make sure you and Monica have a healthy beautiful baby. She's about six weeks pregnant."

At that moment Monica came into the office. Cord stood and indicated his chair.

Monica was quiet and somewhat aloof and Molly wondered why, but she smiled reassuringly at her.

"There's no need to worry, my dear. Everything is fine. I have a list of foods you should eat and some recommended exercises. Of course, you realize dancing is out, but barre exercises will be very good for you. Just don't overdo it." Monica looked up suddenly and smiled, relaxing in front of this friendly woman.

Dr. Kaplan passed two small capsule bottles across the desk. "Vitamins and iron pills. Make sure you take them regularly. Summer is an uncomfortable time to be expecting, so don't go rushing around in the heat. You should come in once a month for a checkup—"

"We'll have to work something else out, Molly," Cord interrupted. "I'm taking Monica out of the city until the baby is born."

Surprised, Monica sat up with a protest ready on her lips. But Cord placed a restraining hand on her shoulder and continued. "I think it would be better if Monica didn't have to worry about the heat at all."

"That's okay," Molly said. "I don't anticipate any complications. Just relax and enjoy the experience!" She smiled at them both.

"I have a question," Monica said. "When is the baby due?"

Molly laughed softly. "How's February fourteenth?"

*

THE GREEN Mountains of central Vermont seemed like a tufted carpeting stretching up and down the creviced hill-sides. For a time the station wagon paralleled the Connecticut River on its journey north. Monica's eyes grew with each new mile.

"We're almost there," Cord said.

"It's beautiful country!" she breathed,

"Yes, it is."

Monica turned to him. "What made you want to buy a house here, Cord?"

"If I hadn't, the land would have gone to a developer for a shopping mall. The people in Randolph didn't want that, but couldn't come up with enough money to make a better offer."

"And you did?"

"Well, sort of. The man who owned it was retiring to Florida with his wife. He was a contractor I'd worked with over the years. He wanted to preserve the land and the inherent nature of the area around his property. It was very comfortable in the summer. It never gets too hot. But the winters can be pretty cold."

Cord turned onto a two-lane road. Almost immediately he made another turn onto a graveled road that dipped and curved, exposing a background hill covered with dense trees and foliage. Along the right side of the road leading up to the hills were large maple trees; on the left, wild raspberries and an old wooden structure like a barn. Beyond the maples was a clearing of mowed grass sloping gently downward and in the center, a white farmhouse with green shutters and a red door.

Cord pulled up behind the house and stopped, turning to study Monica's awed expression.

"Well, we're here," he said.

Monica knew they weren't merely here... they were where she'd always wanted to be.

There were three bedrooms on the second level and a large bathroom. Two large first-floor rooms were separated by

the kitchen, which had a fireplace, and the sitting room, also with a fireplace. There was another bathroom near the kitchen. Cord deposited her bags in the large room on the other side of the sitting room. He then gave her a quick tour to show her where everything was. The house was a pure delight.

"A housekeeper comes twice a week to clean and change linens. Sometimes she cooks meals and leaves them for me."

"I can cook!" Monica informed him.

Cord frowned. "There's no need. I don't intend you to take care of this." He indicated the house. "Or me."

"You mean it wasn't part of the agreement, don't you?" said Monica. "Look, there isn't going to be anything for me to do all day. I won't mind cooking and such."

Cord decided it wasn't worth an argument. "Okay," he agreed shortly and turned into the room off the kitchen. It was large, with only a king-size bed taking up one wall, a desk and chair, and an easy chair near a window. "This is my room," he said, "I'll be near enough if—if anything happens."

"What about the housekeeper? What will she think when she finds me here?"

"Mrs. Gavener knows about you. Before I came down to New York to get you I had her prepare that room. I told her I thought you'd be more comfortable there considering your condition."

"You've thought of everything," Monica said absently.

"I also felt it would be good to have another woman near...." And he left the thought to hang in the air as they returned to the kitchen.

"And what will you do all day?" she asked him.

Cord leaned against a cabinet. "A few of the local bigshots have asked me to design a new library, and the head of the school board wants to build a new house. I think I'll take on both jobs. It will keep me busy until—"

"What's that house over there?" she interrupted, not wanting to hear any

ore. Cord came to look over her shoulder and out the kitchen window.

"That's an old sugar mill," he answered. Monica could feel the warmth of his body, he stood so close. "The last one used to process maple syrup there. hasn't been used in a number of years." As he talked he turned to the door beyond which the car was parked. "I'll just bring in the rest of your things," he said and quickly left, leaving Monica with questions in her eyes. It was not going to be easy being here alone with him.

MONICA WAS introduced to Olivia Gavett, a small wiry lady of incredible energy. She showed Monica how things really worked and explained the odd idiosyncrasies of the old house. Livy also pressed blatant curiosity about her, and so she was to have finally brought Cord into marriage and imminent parenthood. But Monica only smiled politely at such questions, though they became friends.

Cord and Monica coexisted in the house, but nothing more than that. He got up for work early, leaving her to her own devices. She'd sometimes prepare dinner if he was home, but when they sat together, it was mostly in silence or with polite, safe conversation. Now and then Monica would find Cord's steady gray eyes on her and she'd squirm under the unreadable expression.

Her body began to change. She put on weight, and her stomach rounded. Only the loosest garments were comfortable, but Livy came to the rescue when she told her there was a recreation center in town with an exchange of toddler clothing and maternity wear. One afternoon Livy drove her into town and Monica picked out the least obvious-looking constructions in her size. She knew she'd still have supplement this wardrobe somehow. With her arms loaded, they retraced their steps through the building. Faintly Monica heard the piano strains of Erik Satie. She peeped into a room where a young woman was conducting a dance

class of eight young girls, about ten to thirteen years old.

The instructor was adequate, but to Monica, she did not have what it takes to fire a child's imagination to dance.

"Come, let me introduce you to Lynn. I believe she studied in New York." Livy walked her briskly over saying, "Lynn, I'm sorry to break in like this, but I want you to meet a fellow dancer, Monica Temple. Monica, Lynn Martin."

"Hi, Monica." The woman smiled shyly.

"Monica dances with the New York Ballet Corps. She's going to have a baby," Livy said. Lynn smiled ruefully and sighed.

"Congratulations. But at least you had the chance to dance before starting a family."

"Oh, I plan to go back to dancing in the spring," Monica informed her without thinking.

"Will you dance for us?" came a high tiny voice from the center of the room. The three women turned to see the smallest girl sitting on the floor.

"Honey, I don't think Mrs. Temple will be able—"

"Oh, no! I'd love to!" Monica countered. "I can do a five-minute routine for the class if you like."

"This is very kind of you," said Lynn. "Are you quite sure your doctor would approve?"

Monica hadn't been to see a doctor since arriving in Vermont. "I promise to tell him when I see him," she fibbed, satisfying both Livy and Lynn Martin. "Is next week okay for me to come?"

"It's fine. In fact, feel free to stop by anytime you like. I could use an assistant sometimes!" Lynn laughed.

WHEN CORD'S FRIEND Matthew Bell came to visit, he stayed nearly two weeks, his days spent with Cord at the new town library site. In the evenings after dinner, he provided entertainment in the form of amusing anecdotes about his law practice. He behaved with flirtatious gal-

lantry toward Monica, which she found harmless and fun. Cord at times seemed not to notice, but as they went into the second week together, he would frown in apparent disapproval, though he never said anything.

Finally Matt left, promising Cord he'd return in September for the next phase of the contract negotiations. Giving Monica more than just a casual kiss good-bye, he winked wickedly at a silent Cord. With a wave, he gunned his blue sports car down the rough road.

Monica's days fell into a pattern. Three afternoons a week she'd go to the town recreation center and help to teach the ballet class. Enrollment had almost tripled since her impromptu performance.

She wrote regularly to Lee Ann and called her once just to say hello. She often visited with Olivia Gavener, who helped her to sew a number of loose caftans to disguise her thickening figure.

If Matt Bell had not come, perhaps Monica would have gone on doing and managing as she had, but he had injected some fun into the chilly Vermont evenings. She missed his presence. And perhaps if Matt had not come, she would have dealt well enough with Cord. But now she was more painfully aware of her husband than ever.

Monica found herself watching Cord's profile when he wasn't aware. She flushed with the fantasy of lying once more in his arms, against his manly chest, as she had weeks ago. There would be a delicious flow of warmth through her stomach and below, and she'd have to get up and walk around the room to calm herself.

But it would have disturbed Monica even more to know that Cord was also very uncomfortable in her presence. Her face had filled out a bit, making her high cheeks less prominent. There was a healthy tan and glow to her skin, and she had more feminine curves. Monica assailed his senses, and he wasn't sure he liked it... or wanted it.

After a particularly whimsical day with Livy and being at the center, Monica had

no patience for Cord's silent moodiness. She put down her book and chose a Erik Satie recording for the seldom used stereo.

"No wonder your hair is gray," sh said aloud. "All you do is work and frown over papers all the time."

Cord stared at her, his eyes roaming her body, making her uncomfortable. "For your information my hair has always been gray."

"Really?" Monica asked in surprise.

"Well, since I was sixteen. It happened in a year."

"Does it run in the family?"

Cord was silent, and Monica turned to see some unreadable emotion in his eyes. "I wouldn't know. I grew up in an orphanage," he answered tersely.

Monica instantly understood why: baby would be so important to him. I would give him family, continuance perhaps reaffirm his own existence. Sh tactfully let the subject drop.

"You must have more than just you work," she said.

"Do you?" he countered.

"My dance can be joyful. It's what do best."

"Don't you want more? A husband and family?"

"No!" she said harshly. "Dancers are very selfish people. They have to be."

"Then how can you be doing this?" Cord asked her coldly. Monica's hand brushed over her stomach.

"It... it's just a body function. You don't love a body. You love and respect how it performs."

"And I suppose this is just another performance for you?" Cord laughed. Tears blurred Monica's vision.

"Yes!" she shouted. A bleakness took over Cord's features now. "You could have chosen someone you loved and cared for. Someone you wanted to be your wife. But you chose someone who could perform well. You should be happy about it!"

Cord had no answer to her outburst. She was more than half right. Then why did he feel so lousy about it?

"Why did you choose me, Cord?" Monica asked.

He looked at her critically, without warmth. "You were the only one I could see taking to bed," he said evenly.

The blood drained from Monica's face. Her hands clenched as she went stiff with anger. She felt used and degraded. She hated him for making her feel that way. "Someone must have beaten you badly once," she said. And she quickly left the room.

Cord heard her door slam. She had invoked all the most painful moments of his life. He pushed both hands through his hair and squeezed the tense muscles on the back of his neck.

MONICA AND CORD did not talk to one another for three full days. The silence between them was unbearable, and it ained for the entire time.

Monica played her records and danced ballet in her head. When she couldn't stand the inactivity any longer, she practiced some light routines on the solid parquet floor.

She got so involved one afternoon that he didn't notice Cord until she'd spun out of four consecutive pirouettes and ended up facing his stormy features in the sitting room doorway. He was drenched to the skin. Monica gasped in surprise when she saw him.

"Are you out of your mind?" Cord aged at her. "You know damned well you shouldn't be dancing like that. What if you fell, hurt yourself?" Monica knew he was right, but she felt her defenses rising at his tone.

"Why do you care? Your concern is not for me. It's all for the baby!" She lounced over to the stereo, jerking the rm so suddenly, it scratched the record.

"See what you made me do!" she accused and burst into tears. It surprised them both. She sobbed and pushed past him. Cord was right behind her.

"Monica . . ." he began.

"Go away!" she screamed at him. "I hate you! And I hate this place! I won't stay here!"

Cord slowly got hold of her arms and began to pull her toward him.

"You can find someone else to have your baby!" she cried, illogically adding, "And I hope it's a girl!"

"No, you don't hate me," Cord said very low, as he brushed his mouth gently against her temple.

"You are going to have my baby," he said softly, seductively. "And I don't care if it's a girl or a boy." But Monica did not hear him. Her mouth parted as she became fully aware of the close proximity of their bodies, her clothes now becoming wet from his.

Cord's mouth just caressed hers at first, and then his tongue flicked out, brushing across the parted surface of her lips, leaving them moist. She waited for him to claim her mouth, but he continued to play, nibbling at the bottom lip and the corners.

Desire began to take hold of her. Cord's mouth left a trail of scorching kisses over her cheek and down the column of her neck. The hand on her waist moved to her hip and pulled her closer. She was instantly aware of his taut maleness, and his needs. His other hand easily worked its way under her shirt, gently caressing her breast. She heard herself moan.

Some memory then came back to Monica and she suddenly fought against this exquisite feeling.

"No . . ." she breathed brokenly. But Cord's hand moved to grab her chin and turn her face back to his.

"Yes," he whispered, as finally he captured her mouth and kissed her as though she were some source of nourishment he badly craved.

A burning fire was created between the two of them, and for blissful moments Monica enjoyed the sensual ravishing of her mouth. Cord's tongue slowly explored the sweet recesses until she felt she would faint. She was molded against the

lean length of him and one of his hands still cupped her breast.

But again she pulled her mouth away. "Cord, please...don't do this..." she pleaded.

"Why not?" he mumbled against her neck. "I want to make love to you, Monica," he said, trying to recapture her mouth.

"No...."

"You want me to, don't you?" He crushed her to him, brushing kisses over her mouth.

Monica groaned and suddenly, violently, twisted out of his arms. "No!" she lied. "It's more than the bargain we made!"

"What do you mean?" he asked roughly.

"I mean I am not your *wife*. This is no marriage. It's a business arrangement."

Cord could not deny her statement, but right now it didn't matter. He'd spent weeks denying his desire for her. She was beautiful...and he wanted her badly. Was that taking advantage? Or was that just simple need?

"All marriages are business arrangements," Cord answered her softly. But Monica only frowned.

"No. There—there should be caring, and tenderness and respect. How can we respect each other? We don't even *know* each other! In six months I'll be gone from your life, and you won't remember a thing about me except...this." She put her hand over her stomach. "But there's more to me than that!"

"You mean you don't want me to touch you...come near you?"

No, this wasn't what she meant. She wanted very much to feel his arms protectively around her, and to abandon herself to the delicious sensations he could arouse. But she needed something else. "I—I—" she fumbled, unable to put it into words.

"Get out of those wet things and put some clothes on!" he said harshly. Without looking at him again, she left.

What the hell does she expect from me? he asked himself. But the question

was also, What did he want from her? He walked over to the window and absently watched the rain drenching the already lush green hillsides. He was now glad he had to leave in a few days for a week in Boston. He had to separate himself from Monica for a while.

*

MONICA HAD NOT expected to hear from Cord. But she'd hoped. The charming country house was suddenly too large and too quiet, and she spent much of her time at the center in town, or with Livy. As a growing realization that she wanted to know Cortland Temple better weren't enough to think about, three days after he'd gone the baby started to kick and move.

She'd been helping Livy to change the linens, and was daydreaming about Cord in this large bed in his room when she felt a thud against her stomach wall.

Monica gasped, dropped the sheet, and clenched her stomach.

"What's the matter, dear?" Livy asked anxiously.

"Something's happening inside Here!" she said, placing her hand over her stomach.

"Are you in pain? Do you have cramps?" Livy asked. She gently pushed Monica into a chair and held her cold hands.

"No. It—it feels like—like something moving around!"

The worried frown cleared from Livy's face. "You silly child," she admonished. "Your baby is letting you know it's alive and well."

"Then you mean—"

"Yes, this is supposed to happen. Every woman looks for this moment when she knows for sure she's going to have a child!"

Feeling elated that everything was happening as it should, Monica's first reaction was to tell Cord immediately. But she made no move to call him in Boston, as much as she wished she could.

IT WAS ALMOST six o'clock on a Wednesday when Monica heard a car on the gravel road and knew that Cord was home. She was surprised when the passenger door opened to the stocky form of Matthew Bell. He enveloped her in a bear hug like some long lost relative.

"Hiya, gorgeous!" Matt chuckled, then quickly released her, and stood back looking at her in surprise.

"Did I miss something the last time I was here?" By now, Cord had removed his luggage from the wagon and was putting it inside.

He spoke for the first time. "Yes. Monica is going to have a baby."

"Well, I'll be damned!"

"You probably will be!" Cord said caustically. He turned to look down at Monica, and she looked up at him. There was something different about her, something very alive and soft and appealing.

Monica was aware too of the softening look in his eye, as he bent forward to kiss her as any husband would kiss his wife after an absence. When he backed away, Monica's eyes were sparkling and bright. She gently touched his arm.

"Come on inside. I—I wasn't sure when you'd arrive but there's something for dinner."

As they sat down to dinner, Matthew told her he had to leave in the morning for Montpelier. "Cord and I are working together on some of his building contracts," he went on. "So you'll be seeing me off and on all winter."

"I'm afraid he'll turn out to be a permanent fixture. But just say if he gets to be a nuisance," Cord advised.

Monica looked at Cord in surprise.

"So you're going to have a baby," Matt said thoughtfully, looking at her intently. His gaze held more than just curiosity. "Well, old buddy," he turned to Cord, "looks like you'll get the son you've always wanted."

Cord shrugged. "Monica assures me it will be a girl."

"Would you prefer a girl?" Matt asked her seriously.

"No! I mean—"

"She means she doesn't care what it is," Cord filled in smoothly, his voice lacking warmth.

"I just want it to be healthy," Monica added, and gave Cord an angry look. But it was also one of hurt.

"You seem to be suddenly very interested in marriage and children. When will you settle down?" he asked Matt.

Matthew looked at Monica again for a long moment. "I might give it some thought," he answered, "if it was the right person. Maybe someone like Monica."

Monica pushed back her chair and stood up. She suddenly felt very hot and closed in.

"If you'll excuse me, I'll just get the coffee."

"Not for me, thanks," Cord said, standing. "I just want to put away some papers and I think I'll call it a night." He walked away into the sitting room.

"I don't want coffee either, so don't bother," Matt added. Monica began to clear the table. "Do you want some help?" Matt asked so eagerly that Monica smiled at him.

"No, thanks. I'm just going to leave them in the sink until the morning."

"Well..." Matt shrugged. "I guess I'll turn in."

Monica watched as he climbed the stairs. A moment later she heard Cord's voice behind her.

"You still insist on doing all this?"

She swung around sharply to see him leaning in the doorway, arms folded across his chest.

"I don't mind. Really. It gives me something to do." She continued to rinse and stack dishes. "Did you...have a good trip?"

"It was tiring. I don't really enjoy these lengthy trips." Cord came to stand almost directly behind her. "Do you want some help?" he asked so unexpectedly Monica jumped.

"No, I can manage."

But Cord pulled open the dishwasher and started to put the silverware in. "You

pass them to me as you rinse," he ordered. In a few minutes they were finished.

"I don't think you should be doing so much work," Cord said.

Monica laughed a little. "It's good exercise. Livy says it won't hurt."

They stood there in the kitchen looking at one another. She was mesmerized by his gray eyes, for once not steely or cold, and she felt riveted in place by their look. Then, suddenly he turned away from her and moved back toward the sitting room.

"I—I guess I'll say good-night," Monica murmured.

"No, not yet. I want to show you something."

Monica heard the door open and a rush of cold night air suddenly blew a chill across the room. Cord had come in with a piece of furniture, which he set down by the fireplace. It was a rocking chair. A high-backed Windsor with a tight cane seat.

"Well," he began impatiently, "do you like it?"

"Why, yes. It's a lovely chair."

"Here, sit down."

Monica sat gingerly in the chair. "It's very comfortable."

"I was assured it would be. I hope you enjoy it."

"You mean this is for me?" Monica asked, surprised and confused. She laughed nervously. "Thank you, Cord. It was thoughtful of you. And I do love it."

She sat back and closed her eyes, enjoying the chair's soothing motion. Cord watched her silently. He swallowed hard as he recognized a sudden desire to hold her, stroke her, be gentle with her. He wanted to have her lie in his arms, willingly, in warmth and affection.

"Cord?" came her voice quietly.

Cord expelled a ragged breath. "Yes?"

"Where is your home? I mean, when you're not here."

"I guess I don't really live anywhere. I have an apartment in San Antonio and

this house. My jobs keep me moving around."

"But everyone should have a home somewhere."

"You're being too romantic. I've never really had a home." He got up and strode around the room. Then he shrugged. "It's not a place, a house, that makes it special. It's the people with it. Family, friends . . ."

"Children," Monica softly supplied. Cord looked bleakly at her. "A child would give you the basis for a home, wouldn't it? Your own child you could love and protect and give a life to that you never had. Is that why you want a son?"

"Yes," he said simply, never looking at her.

"Then I will give you that son," Monica said very softly to him, as though it was suddenly her decision and solely within her power. It changed the way she looked at her relationship with Cord. Monica was coming to know him, and to see in him a loneliness that was painful and seemingly permanent. He had made himself sufficient onto himself. Except for this need for his own child, and therefore the need for love.

THE LEAVES changed colors and were swept to the ground by fall winds, and the weather got cold. Monica continued to drive the Rover in to the center three days a week, bundled up against the cold. Lynn Martin persuaded her to help choreograph a routine for the intermediate dance class for a Thanksgiving festival. Monica was excited by the idea, wanting very much to use the boys, too, in a way that would keep them interested in dance without threatening their budding masculinity.

Using part of a soundtrack from a James Bond movie, Monica began to visualize the staging and the routine. She'd walk through it herself and refine it, and each class would teach another section. The class insisted on calling the number "Spies."

Cord was busy these days trying to finish the first two phases of construction on the library before winter set in, but Matt Bell slipped in and out of the house during October and November, and Monica was glad of his company. With him she could relax completely. But the more she enjoyed herself during these times, the more withdrawn Cord became.

He could be so pleasant with her, but also cold and remote. She finally decided that what he needed was a room he could escape to, where he could roll out his blueprints or read his contracts with no distraction. She went upstairs one afternoon to look at the empty rooms.

She was imagining a drafting table and a stool, a comfortable chair and lamps, when she heard a door close below.

"Hello, Monica! Are you here?"

"Yes, Matt. I'm upstairs!" she called out.

"What are you doing up there?" he asked, taking off his gloves and looking around. "Are you deserting the bridal suite?" he teased and was surprised at her blush.

"Don't be silly," she snapped. "I thought I'd convert this room into an office for Cord. I want to surprise him."

Matt raised his brows. "Cortland is not big on surprises, Monica," he said carefully. "They have a way of backfiring on him." He saw Monica's confusion and laughed softly. "Though this is different, I guess."

"Surely nothing has been that bad. I mean, I know about his background, but—"

"And don't forget there was Natalie."

Monica's eyes flew open wide. *Who is Natalie?*

"That was a surprise to end all surprises. And naturally when he found out—" Matt stopped talking as he saw Monica go pale. "You didn't know, did you?"

"Know what?" she asked faintly.

"Cord never told you about Natalie?"

Monica couldn't answer at first. Then, "What happened in the past is his own business," she murmured.

"It's your business now. It's why he's difficult to reach, a cold bastard at times. That's why when I found out he'd married, I thought—"

"What, Matt?"

He shrugged. "Maybe that he'd changed. That you were responsible for it. After all, he must love you to—"

Monica twisted away from Matt.

"Monica? I'm sorry! Did I say something— He—he didn't marry you because he had to, did he?" he asked in a tight voice.

Monica chuckled without humor. "Can you imagine anyone making Cord do anything? We have an understanding in our marriage," she began.

"And is the baby part of that understanding?"

"Please don't ask me any more about it, Matt!" she said in great agitation. "Tell me about Natalie."

"Monica, I think it's better if Cord—"

"No! I want you to tell me."

Matthew hesitated and then he began to talk.

Monica listened, staring all the while with blank eyes into space. Many things started to become clear to her now. When Matt was finished, a strained silence filled the room. He reached out and took one of her hands and squeezed it comfortingly.

"I'm sorry, Monica. Believe me, you're worth ten Natalies!"

Monica smiled at his expression.

"And Monica," he breathed in a low unsteady voice, "I'm in love with you! I have been since the moment I first saw you!"

"That's crazy!" she said, bewildered, shaking her head. "You can't be. I never led you to—"

"You didn't have to. It was just—you!"

A frightened cry escaped her and she turned away from him, a pain spreading through her heart. "Matt, please! Please

don't do this! Don't say anymore. I'm married to your best friend, remember?"

IT WOULD BE a long time before Monica could remember exactly how the rest of that interminable day went. She closed herself away in her room, sitting by a window in a numb stupor. Matt's declaration had only served to rouse all her senses, and every nerve in her body to her awakening love for Cord. She felt such despair at the futility of it all, that the feelings threatened to burst out of her.

She came out of her room sometime later when she heard his wagon in the drive. He came into the sitting room and didn't see her immediately as he leaned wearily against the door. Monica watched him and saw how tired he looked.

Cord sensed her presence. "Monica?" he began, walking over to her. "I didn't realize you were there. Are you okay?" he asked, searching her face.

But Monica was mesmerized by his features, and the drawn look around his full mouth. Unconsciously she raised her hand to stroke his cheek.

"You look tired," she said in a vague voice.

Cord was so surprised by this show of concern that he just stared at her. He suppressed a shudder of feeling as he turned away and said in a strange voice, "I'm fine. Don't worry about me."

Monica felt hurt. She moved to sit in her rocker.

"Where is Matt?" Cord asked.

"I don't know. I haven't seen him for the last few—"

"Here I am!"

They both turned to see him standing near the doorway. "I was upstairs packing my belongings," he supplied in his usual manner.

"Matt's leaving in the morning, Cord. He said we won't see him until after the holidays."

"Yeah, old buddy, time for me to vacate for a while."

"You don't have to, Matt..." Cord began.

"Yes, I do. I don't want to overstep my welcome." He sent Monica a rueful grin, causing her to blush. "Look, since this is my last night, why don't I take you guys out for dinner? Are there any decent restaurants in Randolph?"

Cord quirked a brow at him. "As long as you don't expect haute cuisine or four-star service. Why don't I call and make reservations?" He moved into the kitchen to phone.

Alone with Matt, Monica was unaware of her body stiffening and her eyes widening in apprehension.

"Don't, love," he whispered, smiling sadly. "Believe me, I'd never do anything to hurt you."

Monica let out a tight sigh. "I—I'm sorry..."

"There's nothing for you to be sorry about, either."

SOMEHOW MATT managed to carry the evening. Even Cord was in good humor, smiling often and sending soft looks to Monica, making her blush in confusion. He bantered with Matt while Monica listened in relative silence. How different the two men were! Matt, so open and uncomplicated, so full of life and good humor. She liked him. In a way, she was sorry it wasn't Matt she was in love with. But her eyes softened as they swept over Cord, and she knew there was no help for it.

She realized she must have been staring. She blinked quickly at his questioning look. "What? Did you say something?"

"I asked if you were okay," Cord repeated.

"Oh, yes." She laughed. "I guess I was daydreaming."

"I think you're more tired than you realize. Come on, it's time to go home."

At the house, Cord suggested she might want to go to bed, and she didn't argue. She never questioned the brief kiss Cord left on her mouth.

"You should sleep in tomorrow," Matt suggested. "You need lots of rest."

Monica was curious. "How do you know?"

"Two sisters with five kids between them?"

Monica smiled at him. "Okay, you win. Good night." She stifled a yawn and walked to her room.

Cord turned to Matt. "You know there's no reason for you to leave, Matt."

Matt answered bleakly, "I have to, Cord. You two need time together. I've imposed long enough. Two's company—three is trouble." Matt headed for the stairs. Cord looked up at him, and the two friends regarded each other. There was no misunderstanding now.

"Take care of her, Cord," Matt said seriously. He put out his hand and Cord gripped it in farewell.

"We'll see you in a few months," was his grim response.

*

CORD DIDN'T understand why Olivia Gavener was so insistent, but he found himself promising that he and Monica would attend the Thanksgiving festival at the Randolph Recreation Center. Livy also invited them to have Thanksgiving dinner with her afterward.

It snowed on Thanksgiving Day and Cord suggested that perhaps it would be better to stay home. But Monica coaxed him, saying they couldn't disappoint Livy for dinner, and Cord gave in.

The center was ablaze with light and color and children running around in the excitement of performing for family and friends. Cord sat Monica in a side aisle seat so that she had the most room and could get up if she had to without disturbing anyone. When at last her dance group was announced, she began to fidget in her chair.

The lights went down and the music began. The dancers, ages twelve to fifteen, all wore black eye masks. The girls had berets, black tights, and miniskirts over long-sleeved red leotards; the boys

wore black turtleneck sweaters and jeans. The choreography was fast paced and crisp, and when the number ended, Monica felt very proud. The curtain came down to wild applause and whistling.

"That was very good!" Cord said in surprise. At that point the lights came up. Olivia Gavener came on stage.

"We are very pleased that you enjoyed the program this year. We owe a very special hand to Monica Temple, who is responsible for that exciting dance routine!" There was a cheer from Monica's group, who waved at her from behind the curtain on stage.

Cord listened bewildered to the clapping. When it registered that it was for his wife, he stood up and gently pulled her to her feet. He then joined in the applause, a smile playing around his usually stern mouth.

"You're full of surprises," Cord said later in the car. "Why didn't you tell me what you were up to?"

Monica turned her head to look out at the cold clear night. "I didn't think you cared what I was doing," she answered simply without emotion. Cord grimaced. It was true. Until a month or so ago he didn't care. He let her answer go, feeling a little empty.

"If it means anything to you, I was very impressed."

"It means a lot," Monica answered truthfully. Cord turned his head briefly to smile at her. He felt a certain relief all at once. And he was hopeful.

WITH THE WORK stopped on construction because of the cold, Cord found himself more often at the house with Monica. With her here it felt like home. But to admit this would mean to realize deeper feelings.

What Cord could admit was that Natalie would never have been happy here. She would have despaired at the lack of social life. He did not realize right away that thoughts of Natalie no longer sent stabbing pains through his chest. He was

finally healing, but he was too close to the cure to recognize it.

Monica was having a devastating effect on Cord. He found her more physically appealing every day. Seeing her swollen body as she moved through the house had the power to weaken him, make him feel helpless before her. What would it be like without her?

He'd come very close once during the week to asking her to stay past February. Perhaps until April or longer. But the thought of her saying no had stopped him. Suddenly there didn't seem to be enough time to have her here with him, for the feelings in him to grow. When Monica left he would have gained a child but he would have lost her.

In that moment, as he poked at the logs in the fireplace, there was the sound of an exclamation followed by a number of things hitting the floor in the kitchen. Cord's head came up.

"Monica?" he called out. Putting down the poker, he quickly went to the kitchen. There he found Monica standing, her face buried in her hands, sobbing. On the floor at her feet was a fork, a towel, and a leftover roll from dinner. Cord frowned.

"Monica? What's the matter? Are you okay?" She only cried harder.

"No! I'm not okay!" she wailed. "I'm awful!"

She looked up, her face flushed and streaked with tears. Her hair had fallen loose from its usual knot.

"What's the matter?" Cord asked, a bit afraid.

"Everything! I can't sleep. I can't move. I knock things off tables and then... I can't even bend to pick them up!" A wave of wrenching sobs shook her. Cord reached out to touch her, but she pushed his hand away.

"Nothing fits me. I've grown so fat and ugly. I—I feel like... a cow!" she ended on a cry.

Cord didn't wait for another word. He lifted her into his arms and quickly walked with her into her room.

For a moment he sat on her bed with Monica across his lap. She lay back against his strong arm, her head against his shoulder. Cord's free hand stroked her mussed hair and he could say nothing. She continued to cry, shaking in his hold.

"Oh, Cord!" she moaned. "I'll never look pretty again. And I can't even see my toes!"

Cord was shaken with the depth of her feelings. But he chuckled. "Your toes are still there," he assured her. "And the prettiest dancer's feet I've ever seen!"

"Really?" she asked.

"Really," Cord responded. He tightened his arms around her. Her stomach, high and round, rested oddly against his chest. Protected inside was his baby, and this woman whom he held so carefully nurtured it and continuously gave it life. He wanted desperately to tell her she gave him life. But still he held back.

Cord stood up, turning to lay her full upon the bed, and then he sat on the edge facing her. Monica's eyes were wide and sparkling with unshed tears. Cord began to pull the pins from her disheveled hair, and it fell in silken glory to her shoulders and below. It was beautiful.

Monica watched his face, mesmerized by the soft look in his gray eyes as he stroked and smoothed her hair with both hands. She reached up with tentative fingers to touch his lips. They parted in surprise.

"I've always wanted to do that," she murmured.

"Why?" he asked in a low voice.

"To smooth away the tension. So it wouldn't seem so hard," she replied simply.

"Do I appear so hard?" he asked tightly.

"Sometimes. I know I've been a lot of trouble, and now that I've grown so—" A tear slipped down her cheek and Cord slowly bent forward to kiss it away.

He was suddenly aware of desire burning in his loins, but it wasn't all sexual. It was also a need to hold her against

him, to stroke and caress her. He gently put both hands to cradle her face.

"Monica, you could never be ugly. You're more desirable and beautiful now than ever before." Her large amber eyes searched his face for the truth and her lips parted as she found it. Cord softly rolled his lips across hers before settling on them in a kiss of infinite tenderness. Gradually he deepened the kiss until his tongue leisurely explored her mouth.

How could she bear to live without him? What was life, dance, without him to love her this way?

"Cord . . ." Monica whispered against his mouth. He teased her before pulling back.

He knew he was not mistaken in reading her look. She wanted him to make love to her as much as he wanted to. He brushed her open mouth again with his and slowly shook his head.

"I'm afraid I'll hurt you . . . or the baby," he said huskily, and lifted his chin to see into her face. "Don't be ashamed of wanting me," he told her seriously. "I feel the same way."

Cord's arm pressed against her side. He felt something move. He looked up and found Monica grinning at him. Cord's heart turned over. Monica laid his hand flat against her stomach. Nothing could have brought into focus more poignantly the reality of his baby. For a moment he couldn't speak.

"He's very active!" Monica mused, her tears finally spent. "Only a football player would kick this hard!" she said.

"Or a dancer!" Cord smiled, his face suddenly years younger. Monica wondered abstractedly what he'd been like ten or fifteen years ago. Had he laughed often with Natalie? She sobered quickly.

"What's the matter?" Cord asked.

"I—I'm sorry. I didn't mean to create such a scene!"

"You didn't. Besides, I understand crying is a symptom of the condition. Do you have any others?"

"Sometimes I have a craving for strawberry ice cream!"

"Are you serious?" he asked.

"You have to admit it's better than pickles!"

"Not by much," he said ruefully. "I'll be back in a minute." He left, and Monica could hear him in the kitchen. After about fifteen minutes Cord came back with a mug in his hand.

"It's not strawberry ice cream, but it's probably better for you." It was hot cocoa. She relaxed and began to sip. Over the top of the mug she watched as Cord unbuttoned his shirt and removed it. Then he removed the rest of his clothes.

Monica watched the hard, firm body as he undressed. He was really magnificent, she thought with some pride. She finished her cocoa and Cord took the empty cup. He turned out the light.

Monica was aware of his weight on the bed as he climbed in beside her. There was only one position possible, and she turned on her side, her back to him. Cord closed the distance until Monica felt his middle and chest right against her back. She felt his hand stroke her hair, then it gently crossed over her hip and settled on her stomach.

She was delirious. An unseen smile shaped her mouth and a comfortable drowsiness assailed her.

"Go to sleep," Cord whispered. Monica couldn't have been happier or known more joy than she did in this instant with Cord beside her.

MONICA'S ARM swung out from her body, falling heavily, but the space next to her was unoccupied. Had Cord really been here holding her the entire night?

She wasn't sure.

She got up and dressed in one of her roomy caftans. She made her hair into one braid to hang down her back.

She found Cord sweeping ashes from the hearth onto a tin. He was dressed in corduroy slacks and a heavy black turtleneck sweater. As she watched, Cord turned his head, smiling as he looked directly at her.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?" He stood up and walked over to her.

"Very well," she answered. "And you? Were you very uncomfortable?"

Cord took the time to look over her face and the changed hairstyle. "Yes," he said ruefully. "But not for the reasons you imagine."

"Would you like some breakfast?" Monica questioned.

"That would be nice."

She began to prepare the makings for French toast and to section a grapefruit. Cord reached over to get mugs from a cabinet, giving a gentle tug on her long braid. He poured the coffee and set the table. It made her feel normal, fixing breakfast for her husband. The word *husband* now had a magical sound to it, as together they served each other breakfast and sat down to eat at the kitchen table.

"That's the best French toast I've ever eaten," he admitted.

"Thank you." She smiled.

He moved his hands to grab her fingers and idly play with them. "I have to go to New York for a few days," he stated without preamble. "Would you like to come with me?"

Her dimples were showing as she smiled at him. "I would like very much to come with you. When?"

"We'll leave day after tomorrow. Take a plane out of Lebanon. I don't think a five-hour car ride would do you any good." She was pleased with his concern.

"Unless you'd be more comfortable here...."

"I'll be fine! And I'll go see Molly Kaplan. I promise not to get into any mischief!"

"How can I refuse an offer like that?" he said.

"Then it's okay?"

His grin was slow in going from his mouth to his gray eyes. "Yes, sweetheart," he said in a husky voice. "You can come."

Monica stared. He had used the endearment as though he did so all the time.

"OH, MONICA! It's so good to hear your voice! I can't believe you're really here in New York!" Donna's excitement was infectious.

Monica laughed. "I can't either. I've been away so long, everything looks odd and out of place...."

"When do I get to see you?"

"Oh, anytime, I guess. Cord has business and I have to see my doctor, but I'm dying to see you. And I have to thank you for letting Cord and me stay in the apartment. I feel so guilty that you have to stay somewhere else!"

"Well, don't, you goose. It is still half your apartment. And besides; it was a perfect excuse to spend a week with Paul!"

"Paul? Who's Paul?"

"Oh, just someone I met last autumn. I'll tell you all about him when I see you. Let's meet for lunch. When do you see the doctor?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Fine. Meet me at O'Neal's, say, one o'clock?"

DR. MOLLY KAPLAN greeted her the next morning in the same cheerful manner she'd used the first time.

Molly examined Monica, all the time keeping up an unending chatter that she found soothing. "Now, where do you intend to have the baby?" Molly wanted to know.

"We haven't really given it any thought," Monica replied. The mere mention of these considerations was enough to depress her.

"Well," Molly sighed, "physically, everything is fine. But I want you to promise me to relax and get more rest. You seem anxious. That's not good for you. Believe me, everything will be fine!"

Monica groaned. How she wanted to believe that.

Any unsure thoughts were temporarily dispelled a few hours later when she saw Donna, and they threw themselves, somewhat awkwardly, into each other's arms.

"My goodness!" Donna exclaimed, holding her at arm's length. "Monica, you look wonderful! Radiant, to put it frankly."

Monica blushed as Donna launched into a set of adjectives to describe her. Then there was greeting Mama Conors, and to Monica's surprise and pleasure, no mere lunch, but a baby shower.

They were seated in a private corner of the restaurant, and one by one the women presented Monica with gifts for the baby. As they started lunch, the talk became more general. But Donna, sitting next to Monica, took the opportunity to speak low to her.

"So, how are things going?"

"Okay, I guess."

Donna raised her brows. "You guess! Let me make a number of observations." Monica looked apprehensively at her. "First of all, you look absolutely beautiful. Being pregnant agrees with you. Second of all, it must be Vermont, or Cord—or both!" Monica moved to interrupt, but Donna continued. "Third, I think it's Cord. *I believe* you're very much in love with him! And that changes everything!"

"No, it doesn't!" Monica responded miserably.

"But why not?"

"Because he doesn't know."

"Why not?" Donna persisted.

"I haven't been able to tell him. The timing never seems quite right. And... there was someone else in his past. I think he's still in love with her."

Donna moaned, running a hand through her tight curls. "Well, it seems to me you should tell him how you feel. What have you got to lose?"

"Donna, I couldn't! He might laugh at me."

"Or he might tell you he loves you!"

"I can't. I just can't!"

"But you can't go on like this!"

"I know, but maybe something will happen in the next month." As she talked, Monica gently rested a hand

on her stomach. Donna noticed and frowned.

"Monica, I have just one other observation to make." She whispered for Monica's ear alone.

"What's that?"

"I don't think you'll ever be able to give up that baby," Donna said.

Monica went ashen. Not because Donna had been so bold, but because of the truth in what she'd said.

CORD SETTLED back into his chair and casually stretched out his long legs.

"I was surprised when you said you wanted to see me, Cord. Wouldn't a phone call have served?" Lawrence Gordon asked.

"I didn't want to talk to you from the apartment. I'd prefer if Monica didn't know about this visit."

"Is something wrong?"

"No," Cord replied. "Everything is just different!"

Lawrence had a pretty good idea that Monica played a very large part in things being different. But it did not speak well that Cord was here and didn't want her to know of it.

"Well, in any case, how can I be of help?"

Cord leaned forward and clasped his hands together. "Lawrence, I want you to find out where Monica has been sending money from her account."

After Gordon had recovered, he cleared his throat.

"Well, I know that some went last month to California. That could have been family. And some was sent to London. A rather large amount, in fact."

"Lawrence, I want names and addresses."

"It may take time. Christmas is next week, you know. And it *could* go beyond the bounds of the agreement, Cord. I'm sure Miss, er, Monica has very personal reasons for what she's doing."

"And I have very personal reasons for needing to know!" Cord said tightly. He strode in agitation around the office now.

"Okay, Cord. I'll get started on it right away."

MONICA COULD not contain her joy when Cord said they were going out for the evening.

When the cab pulled up in front of the New York State Theater, where the State Ballet Corps was performing, Monica turned tearful eyes to him.

"Don't, sweetheart," he whispered, carefully helping her from the car. "You're supposed to enjoy this."

"Oh, Cord, I will!"

In fact, they both did. It was a little bittersweet for Monica, who knew some of the dancers and had danced the female lead a few seasons back.

During the intermission she turned to him, unconsciously grabbing his hand. "Thank you, Cord. It's a wonderful surprise!"

He smiled. "Are you always so easy to please?"

"Yes," she answered honestly.

He winked at her, and she was able to relax and enjoy the rest of the performance.

When they at last got up to leave, he took her arm to support her up the aisle. "Would you like to go for a late supper?"

"If you don't mind, I'm a bit tired. My baby is getting so heavy these days." When she realized what she'd said, she paled and drew in her breath.

"Home, then," he answered evenly, "so I can put both to bed."

*

THEY HAD Christmas dinner with Livy, and exchanged presents. She gave Monica a hand-knitted afghan for the baby, and to both of them a brocade-covered photo album for baby pictures. Monica became very still, her face draining. Only Cord noticed and told Olivia he thought he should get Monica home because she looked tired.

"It was very thoughtful of Livy to make something for the baby," Monica commented, once in the car.

"Yes, it was," Cord responded dully.

"It will take you a very long time to fill the album."

"I suppose," was his terse response.

At the house Monica was about to say good-night when Cord spoke.

"Before you go to bed, I have something for you." He disappeared into his room and returned with two boxes. She followed him into the sitting room, continuing past him to her room and also returning with several boxes. Monica sat in her rocker and passed him his presents.

"You first," she said softly. Cord hesitated, then started with the largest package, peeling away ribbons and paper. It was a footstool with a needle-point design on the cushioned top. He ran his hands gently over it.

"Are you trying to tell me that I'm getting old and need to put my feet up at night?"

Monica blanched. "Oh, no! Why, to me you're very—" She stopped.

"I'm very what?" Cord prompted.

Monica finally saw that he was teasing her, and she relaxed and answered his smile.

"Did you do this?" Cord asked. Monica nodded.

"It's beautiful work. It must have taken you weeks."

"Not many." She shrugged. "Try it out."

Cord placed the stool in front of his chair. "Perfect!" he announced, quirking a brow at her. "Thank you." Then Cord found himself opening a large brown leather portfolio. It was just the size for his preliminary layouts and sketches. Monica was delighted with the surprised look on his face. She'd made the right choice.

Now it was her turn. The first gift was a necklace of evenly matched pearls. "Oh, Cord! You shouldn't have. This must have been so expensive!"

"I was sure they'd suit you with your reddish hair." He took the strand and stood behind her to clasp it around her throat.

"They're exquisite! Thank you seemingly enough."

"Don't say anything. I can see you're eased," he said.

Her second gift was a black jersey dress with a gentle scoop in the bodice and long sleeves. "This is beautiful! But it's fitted, and I'm much too large."

"It's not for now. It's for after you have the baby. The pearl necklace will look very nice with it," he said.

Monica was shaken by his reference to herward. "It was very thoughtful of you. Thank you." To hide her confusion, she pulled from the side of her pocket yet another gift and handed it to him. Cord did likewise. For Monica it was a record.

"That's to replace the one I made you in, remember?"

She remembered. How foolish she'd been that afternoon!

Cord unwrapped the last gift, and Monica sat now wishing that she hadn't gotten it. It was a book on being a father, a lighthearted view with colorful cartoon drawings.

When Cord had opened it, he looked at Monica long and steady and she grew warm under his gaze. Monica would never know what really happened next. Suddenly she was standing, clasped in his arms, her high round stomach pressed to him. She could barely breathe, held her so close, but she didn't care.

"I love you! Cord, I love you so!"

"Monica, I don't want you to leave." Their lines crossed each other in a tangle of words, neither certain they'd heard the other correctly. But it didn't matter as Cord held her face and bent to kiss her. Monica clung to him unashamed. Her parted lips answered his kiss without hesitation. She wanted him to feel the love vibrating from her.

Cord was very gentle, but his mouth moved sensuously and deeply over hers,

exploring the sweetness, and seeming to draw her very soul from her.

"I want you so much," he murmured, beginning to press scorching kisses down one side of her face until he could again ply one from her mouth. Monica was beginning to tremble. Suddenly Cord took her by the arms and forced her away from him. He swallowed hard, the muscles in his arms and jaw tensing.

"I want you to go to bed now," he said in a husky voice.

"I want to stay with you."

"Not tonight, Monica," he said gently. "We'll talk in the morning."

Monica looked with appeal to him. She put her hand to his cheek to stroke it and Cord turned his head until his lips kissed her palm.

"Cord, couldn't we—"

"God, Monica!" he breathed. Against his will, he once more held her in his arms. The kiss this time was persistent, probing and passionate. Monica pressed to get closer to him, feeling his rapid heartbeat on her breast. Cord cupped her face.

"Sweetheart, one of us has to keep a clear head."

She started to speak.

"Please, Monica." And she gave in knowing his control would outlast her own.

Cord walked her to her room. She whispered a reluctant good-night, but Cord's only response was to close the door firmly on her. Monica went to bed. To her surprise she fell into an instant peaceful sleep.

WHEN MONICA finally woke up she scrambled to get dressed, anxious to be with Cord. Dear heaven, it was going to be okay. She wouldn't have to leave. She wouldn't have to give up the baby. She would be free to love Cord and they would be a real family. Gone for the moment were all thoughts of New York, of Lee Ann, even of her own dance career. Her new relationship with Cord was the most important thing in her life.

Monica dressed in her green caftan, the one Cord liked, and her pearls. She swept out of her room and into the sitting room, then on into the kitchen calling his name. There was no answer. The coffee had been started, but there was no fire, so she knelt awkwardly in front of the kitchen hearth and got one going. When she went to plug in the coffeemaker, she found Cord's note. There had been a call from the library site. Vandals had broken in overnight and he'd had to go and assess the damage.

Twenty minutes later, Cord called to tell her what was happening.

"Is everything all right?"

"No, but not as bad as I thought it would be. So far it's just stolen supplies and equipment. We haven't finished checking to see if there's any damage to the work."

He sounded very tired.

"I've been here since seven-thirty. I'm not sure when I'll finish."

"I don't suppose you've had anything to eat?" she asked, concerned.

"No," Cord admitted.

"I'll have a meal waiting for you."

"That sounds nice," Cord said in a low voice. "Look, I've got to get back. But...last night wasn't a dream, was it?"

Monica laughed softly. "If it was, we both had the same dream! I'll be here waiting."

"I'll see you when I can," Cord said. "Bye."

She hoped it wouldn't take too long. There was still so much to be said, and she needed the security of his arms about her. With Cord not there, last night did take on dreamlike qualities.

Monica planned a cozy dinner for the two of them that she hoped would reestablish the atmosphere of the night before. She set up a drop-leaf table in the sitting room complete with candles.

Livy called, promising to come and see her soon. The call inspired Monica and dialing the overseas operator, she placed a call to Lee Ann. Soon her distant, excited voice was on the other end.

"Hello, Lee! Merry Christmas!"

"Niki! It's so good to hear you!"

"It's good to hear you too! How dance?"

"A lot of work. I come back to the dorm each day thinking my feet are going to fall off. But I love it."

Monica laughed. "I know the feeling!"

"I miss you, Monica. I can't wait to see you! You won't recognize me, you know. I'm all grown up now."

"I bet, and I miss you too, Lee. Very much."

"Can you come to London and visit?

"No, not right now, but soon, love. promise."

Lee Ann sighed.

"Look, Lee, I've got to go now. There's a check on the way to you, an I'll write soon."

"Okay, Niki. Happy New Year. And love you."

"Happy New Year, Lee. I love you too. Bye."

Monica sat deep in thought, a smile playing on her lips, and she absentmindedly rubbed at a small pain in her stomach. She looked up to find Cord leaning in the kitchen doorway. "Oh, Cord! You frightened me!" She smiled broadly.

"How long have you been standin' there?" A sudden twist of apprehension grabbed at Monica as she looked into Cord's tight, cold face.

"Long enough," came his answer.

"Are— are you okay? Is it the library You look so—"

"What? How do I look?"

"You seem angry. Something must have happened."

Cord moved toward her. "Somethin' did. I just realized what a complete fool I've been."

Monica frowned. "Why?"

"For thinking that you were different. But I was wrong. You're just as I'd first thought. Hard and calculating!"

Monica stared at him. "What are you saying?"

"Come off it, Monica!" He laughed mirthlessly. "Cut out the act! You seemed so soft and vulnerable. Yet s

ng and determined. I wanted so much —” His face contorted into anger in. “I’m no longer even sure the baby nine!” he exploded. “Whose is it, Monica? Is it your lover’s? Who’s Lee? d Matthew... I was beginning to nder. Was he your lover too?”

Monica’s eyes grew steadily wider and went white with shock. God! What s he saying? Tears filled her eyes but refused to let them spill. Cord never i a chance to say another word. Be e she realized what she was doing, her ht hand landed with all the power she ld gather across Cord’s face. He bbed her wrist and she jerked it vio lently away from his grasp.

“How dare you!” she gritted, every t of her body trembling in rage and t. “Matthew Bell is not my lover. Nor e ever been! And Lee—Lee Ann mlin—is my sister!”

Cord went still with disbelief. A vning expression of horror slowly ed his face.

“You’re right about the baby, how r,” she whispered in a voice tinged h pain. “It’s not yours. It’s mine! And never, *never* give it up to you!”

Monica rushed past him to her room, bing. She slammed the door so hard late tipped over on the kitchen hutch I smashed on the floor.

E DOOR to Monica’s room was locked, i he could still hear her crying. He tly called her name several times, but didn’t acknowledge him. It was not rd’s nature to plead and so he gave up orsorfully. He could easily have forced door open, but for what? Sooner or e she’d have to come out and, hope ly, he could repair the damage he’d ie.

Why didn’t he remember that she had ounger sister? Hadn’t Lawrence Gor n told him so, last spring when she’d ne for the interview? But then he ln’t cared anything at all about her.

Cord sat in anguish in the sitting room, staring bleakly at the table set romantically for two.

He listened to her crying well into the night, until finally it stopped and he knew sh’d fallen asleep. But it would be almost dawn before he took himself off to his own bed to sleep fully clothed across the top.

Cord woke up at noon and only then because the phone was ringing. The call was from the town council, asking him to come into town and make a report on the library incident so that a claim could be filed with the insurance company.

He walked to Monica’s door but there was no sound on the other side. He raised his hand to knock but didn’t. Twenty minutes later he was struggling into his heavy coat, but Cord felt suddenly conf dent that he and Monica would straighten this mess out when he got back. It was beginning to snow heavily, so sh’d be forced to stay in. As an opening gesture, Cord took a sheet of note paper and scrawled “I’m sorry” on it. He left it on the counter.

Monica had not heard the phone, but she had heard Cord leaving. The sound of the door closing behind him put a finality to her feelings of despair and hurt, and she collapsed in fresh tears. She felt limp, weak and sore all over. She hoped she had done no harm to her baby.

She loved Cord as sh’d never believed it possible to love anyone. And she knew that it would always be so. But he did not trust or love her. That left her with only her dreams, and with the baby.

She found one of her suitcases and began to pile in her clothing, her agitation reflected in the thoughtless shamble of items she threw in. But she was meticulous in packing the baby things given her by Olivia and her friends in New York. Everything else, including the pearls Cord gave her, she left behind.

Monica made one final phone call and began to load her bag into the station wagon. She never saw Cord’s note on the counter. She knew only the pressing need to get away.

She skidded several times in the fast freezing snow, and twice cars honked at her as she carelessly wandered over the center line, but Monica continued on in grim determination.

The wind began to whip the icy snow against her windshield and she couldn't see clearly. Only then did she begin to regret her impulsive actions, as she struggled to keep the car on her side of the road. Without warning, the tires slid over a slick portion of the road and the car went into a complete skid. In fright Monica began to turn the wheel every which way, but it did no good, and she watched helplessly as the car slid off the shoulder into a snowdrift.

She sat for a breathless moment before struggling to get her door open. It was bitter cold and she was huddled against the side of the wagon wondering what to do now when a pick-up came ambling along. It stopped, and a middle-aged farmer shouted out the window at her.

"You in trouble, lady?"

"Y-yes! My car went off the road."

"Well, you'll have to leave it. Where you headed?"

"I'm trying to get to Lebanon."

"I'm headed a little west of there. I can take you."

"Oh, yes! Please!"

The man helped Monica into the passenger side, saying a bit sternly when he saw her condition that she was crazy to be out here anyway. She didn't argue the point.

It took almost two hours to get to New Hampshire, and soon the pickup was pulling up into a parking lot. The driver went into a small modern structure, returning less than ten minutes later.

"Well," he shouted over the rising wind to Monica, "it looks like you just made it! They'll have to close down after this one leaves."

"I can't thank you enough for all your help," Monica said.

"Not to worry," he responded, walking Monica with her bag into the airport for her flight to New York.

CORD HAD no cause to celebrate the New Year, sitting silently in the big house as had for nearly a week, hoping to hear from Monica or anyone who knew where she was. He kept Livy at bay, but openly accused him of having done something to upset Monica. He continued to call her mother's number in California and continued to get no answer. Donna, in New York, had not seen Monica or heard from her.

On January 6 Matthew showed up with a large, awkward package in his arms. Cord was actually glad to see him, presence eliminating yet another question. Matt turned his smiling face to friend. He was shocked at what he saw.

"I don't mind telling you, old bud, you look like hell! But I don't want to see you anyway. Where's your gorged wife?"

Cord just stared at him. Matt grew cold inside, remembering that look of one other time in Cord's life.

"Where is she, Cord?" he asked in low voice.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you do know?" Matt asked in disbelief. "What happened? What did you do to her?"

Cord's eyes narrowed as he looked at Matt. He had been right. The look on his face was real concern...and love.

Matt almost shouted. "So help me God, if you've hurt her, I'll—"

"You'll what? I think you forgot Monica is my wife!"

"Only because a piece of paper says so. You've never treated her like a wife. She probably the best thing that ever happened to you. And you ignore her. Why can't you forget Natalie?"

"To hell with Natalie!" Cord growled. "I don't give a damn about her. She no longer exists!"

"You don't give a damn about Monica either!"

Cord seemed not to have heard. "She's my wife, Matt."

"You say that as if you're just finding out!" Matt said impatiently. "Monica loves you, Cord. Heaven only knows

y! But she said you had an arrangement. What did she mean?"
Cord stiffened. "Matt, let it go. Don't ask me again about my marriage to Monica."

Matt saw that he meant it. He walked over to a chair and sat down heavily. "What happened?" he asked quietly. Cord tensed muscles all over his body. "I said some things.... I accused her—" He stopped.

"Good God!" Matt groaned, perfectly capable of filling in the details. "You treated her like she was all the women you've ever met. Couldn't you have been living here with her that she was different?"

Cord rubbed at his temples. "I only know that I want her...and it may be too early."

Matt shook his head. "Would it have been so hard to tell her that? Monica is so much in love with you."

Cord looked very long and steady at Matthew. "Do you love her so much yourself?"

Matt's head jerked up sharply and his eyes looked hollow with feeling for the rest second. Then a lopsided grin took over.

"Hell, Cord, Monica's a special lady. Why wouldn't I love her?"

Cord stared a moment longer. The awareness had finally caught up to him. After eating, Matt insisted he get something. The package Matt came with was sitting in the middle of the floor.

"What is that?" Cord asked, pointing to it with his toe.

"It's your Christmas present," said Matt.

Cord pulled away the paper and sat looking bleakly at the wooden structure in front of him.

"I picked it up in West Virginia. It's all handmade," Matt said softly. "It was a cradle."

*

TWO PHONE CALLS the next morning gave Cord all the information he needed to find Monica. The first was from Lawrence Gordon. He'd found out that the money going to London was for one Lee Ann Hamlin, Monica's stepsister, enrolled as a talented prospect at the highly regarded Royal Ballet in London. None of the money had been personally used by Monica.

Cord and Matt were just about to leave the house when Molly Kaplan called. She wasted no time getting to the point.

"Look, I don't know what's been going on up there, and right now I don't care. But I have Monica here, and I believe she's going to go into labor any time."

"Monica...with you?" Cord asked.

"Yes. She's been here for more than a week. I haven't been able to get much out of her, but she made me promise not to tell you where she was."

"How could you keep a promise like that, Molly? I've been out of my mind with worry!"

"Cord, my first concern is for Monica and the baby. She was clearly upset over something to do with you. I'm her doctor and I felt I had to comply. I couldn't risk her getting any more worked up."

"How—how is she, Molly?"

Molly let out a deep sigh. "I don't know. She's still emotionally wound up and that could present problems during labor. We're not in trouble yet. But I think you'd better get down here as fast as you can. She's at Lennox Hill Hospital. I'll talk to you then."

At five-thirty Cord walked briskly through the doors of the hospital. He was directed to maternity and Molly Kaplan's office. He turned to head down the corridor.

"Cord!" he heard behind him. It was Molly.

"Where's Monica? How is she?"

"I have her prepped and she's in a private room. She's in first-stage labor but

she's still having a bad time. She's holding herself in."

"For God's sake, Molly! Is she going to be okay?"

Molly sighed. "Yes, but labor could be long...and difficult. I told her I'd called you, and she got upset. I told her you were very concerned and had been looking for her."

"What did she say?" Cord asked, somewhat afraid to know the answer.

"She said something about only having the baby, and then she cried."

"I want to see her."

"Of course. See if you can calm her down, Cord. We need her cooperation. And be gentle with her." The door swung closed behind him.

Monica lay on the bed in a partial sitting position, her eyes closed. She appeared to be sleeping, but her face was damp with perspiration. Cord softly called her name, placing a hand over hers.

Monica opened her eyes.

"The...baby doesn't want to be born," she whispered.

"Maybe it needs help." Cord tensed his jaw.

"You can't take him if I don't have him," she said tersely. She slid her hand out from under his.

"Monica...Monica, I'm sorry. I'll never be able to tell you how much—"

"It doesn't matter. It's my baby." She turned her head away, crying silently. "It's all I have."

"I want you, Monica. I need you. I—I don't know what I'd do if anything happens to you!"

"You'll just go back to being Cord." She suddenly arched her back, grimacing. "You'll never need anyone," she finished in a moan.

Cord leaned over her. "That's not true. I need you more than anything else in my life. I want you and the baby. Please try to forgive me. I've been such a fool." He brushed a shaky hand over her wet cheek. She seemed to be in such pain. He tried to distract her. "Listen. Matt says hello. He expects to see our son

anytime now. And he's expecting to be godparent."

"Matt? Matthew loves me!" she said vaguely.

Cord paled. "Yes, Matt does love you."

Monica laughed weakly. "But I love you. Isn't that funny? I can only love you and it doesn't matter!"

"Monica, listen to me! I do love you. Cord looked at her with tenderness. "You're my wife. I love you, Monica. I want another chance to prove it to you. You'll never know how crazy I was without you!"

Monica breathed a shaky laugh. "You'll never know how crazy I was without you! Oh, Cord, I don't know if we can do it. There was so much said."

"Trust me! Believe me, I'll make right!"

She looked again at him. She loved him so much she wanted to take all the worry lines from his face. She reached out to touch his cheek, but once again twisted in pain, this time crying out. Cord grabbed her hand and her fingers closed tightly over his.

"Monica!"

"I—I think you'd better get Molly," she whispered.

AT 12:17 A.M. on January 9 Cortlar Temple became forty-one years old, at the father of a little girl. Erin Bridgeman Temple demanded instant gratification upon her entry into the world, and after having been washed and wrapped, was placed in Monica's arms for a well-deserved meal.

She soon fell asleep and was taken to the nursery.

Cord came cautiously into the room to find a glowing but exhausted Monica. She looked beautiful. He'd forever remember this sight of his wife minutes after their baby had been born. Cord took Monica's hand and bent to kiss her gently.

"Are you okay?"

"Ummmm. Just a little tired. Have you seen your daughter?"

"Not yet. I wanted to see her mother first. Monica, how do you feel?" he asked with concern.

"It was long." Her voice was fading, but a smile curved her mouth. "But she's beautiful. She looks just like you."

"Then she can't be beautiful! But maybe she'll grow out of it."

Monica smiled wanly, her eyes struggling to stay open. "I'm very happy with

her. She's perfect. But I wanted so much... to give you a boy. I'm sorry." Her eyes closed.

"I'm not," Cord whispered, bending to kiss her again. "Next time it will be a son."

A very faint smile lifted Monica's mouth. She was already asleep. But she dreamed...of the future, with her family.



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**Look for these stories
and many more in
future issues!**

READER'S CORNER

CROSSWORD #11

CROSS

1. Copper or iron
6. "____ la Douce"
0. Prison room
4. Solitary
5. Close by
6. Region
7. Playground item
8. Small dessert
9. Flake variety
0. "A ____ of Two Cities"
1. Soccer great
2. Mine product
3. Actress Gale
5. Oaks-to-be
8. Relaxation room
1. Wayside stop
2. Wound mark
3. Like an evening gown
5. "Hey, Big ____"
(song)
8. Chore
9. Buzzards or Montego
0. Test
2. Prepared for 40 Across
5. Three times
7. Memo
8. Baseball's Durocher
9. Decade number
50. Enjoys a cigar
13. Flies off the handle
15. Faucet
16. Gasp
17. Laughter sound
11. By word of mouth
13. ____ the Red
14. Certain Italian
15. River of Egypt
16. Floral-arranger's device
17. Common contraction
18. Cardinal point

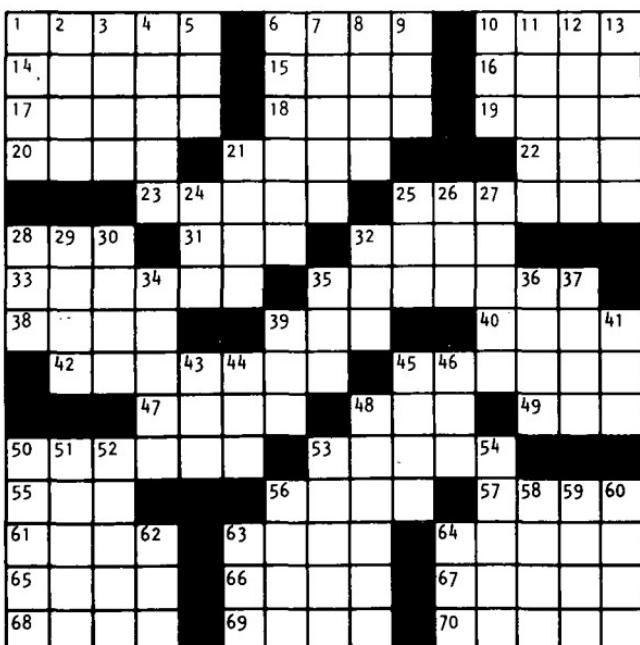
69. "Mine ____ have seen the glory . . ."
70. Fixes

DOWN

1. Spar
2. Singer Fitzgerald
3. Work hard
4. South American mountains
5. Confederate general
6. Hospital worker
7. Kingdom
8. She-horse
9. Singer Garfunkel
10. Taxi
11. Mistake
12. Live and ____
13. Narrow paths
21. Tot's steed
24. "____ the season . . ."
25. Top pilot
26. Has the ability
27. Command
28. Insecticide letters
29. Time periods
30. Robin's home
32. Secret agent
34. Flower of "Bambi"
35. Woeful
36. Departure sign
37. Speed contest
39. One at home in a hive
41. Males
43. Female deer

44. ____ a boy!
45. Camper's need
46. Steaming
48. Spears
50. "A rolling ____"
51. Ms. Callas
52. October gems
53. Poker word
54. Landlubber's locale
56. Implore
58. Prayer ending
59. Glove filler
60. Picnic pests
62. Allow
63. Holiday night
64. Male sheep

Solution on page 25
of this issue.



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Harlequin



WORLD'S BEST

Romances

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Reyna MacKenzie vowed she'd never again succumb to Trevor Langdon's promise of love. He'd come to Hawaii to reclaim her. But six months in the tropics had changed Reyna from a cool career woman to a tawny tigress who had come to her senses at last. She was ready for a blazing affair—until the fire she started flared out of control.

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In all her considerable experience, Maggie Trent, movie producer, had never met anyone more attractive than Clinton Rafferty. But he was just what Maggie hated most—an overconfident, oversexed womanizer. She was determined not to respond to him. But with Clint, his teenage daughter and her own all pitted against her, Maggie found the odds were—luckily—not in her favor.

LUCY GORDON—The Carrister Pride

From the outside, Carrister Hall looked like a magnificent survivor of England's baronial past. But the old days were gone, and Jenny Carrister was forced to accommodate paying guests. Then Philip Thornhill walked into the Hall, and suddenly the air crackled with promise. But why was Philip so interested in saving Carrister Hall—and was the tenderness in his glance a mask for something more dangerous than love?

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Classical ballet dancer Monica Hamlin faced the abrupt injury-caused end of her career with great fear. She had counted on her income to help finance her younger sister's training at the world's finest ballet academy. In desperation, Monica answered a mysterious advertisement for a short-term position—and fell right into Cord Temple's perfectly executed plan!